

Sima Shvarts' Mother Risya Shvarts



My mother Risya Shvarts [nee Vainstein] before her marriage. The photo was taken in Rzhishev in 1912. My mother's parents, my maternal grandparents, were Ilya and Chaya Vainstein. Grandfather Ilya was a teacher. He died before my birth, but my mother told me a lot about him. He was a highly educated man, but I don't know what institution he finished. I know that he taught grammar and arithmetic. My mother said that my grandfather also knew French. At their house he had a special big room equipped for teaching children. There was a big wooden table. Children would come, sit around that table, and grandfather would sit at the head of the table. This is how he taught. During the break, grandmother would give them something to eat, then they rested, and then grandfather would continue teaching. He taught in Yiddish. Grandfather was totally involved in his teaching work. He gathered poor Jewish children from his town; he found around 30 of them. He taught them free of charge. I can't even tell you exactly where the family got money from - my mother never discussed this question with me. My mother was born in Rzhishev in 1885. She only completed a Jewish junior school. Her family was very poor and didn't have the money to pay for the education of their children. Besides, my mother had to help grandmother with the housework and take care of her younger sisters. Later, when she got married, she couldn't study because she was busy. My parents got married in 1913. They lived together for only one year. When the war broke out, my father was called up to the army. He was sent to the front, he wrote to my mother, but then his letters stopped coming and he didn't return from the war. In Rzhishev we lived in my mother's parents' house. I can vaguely remember that house because I was only four years old in 1918, when we moved to Kiev. I remember that there was one big room and two bedrooms. There was also an attic where they kept winter clothes and shoes, as well as the kosher kitchen utensils [for Passover]. At that time relations between Ukrainians, Russians and Jews were wonderful. I know it because later in Kiev my mother told me that every time she heard somebody saying the word 'zhyd' [kike], she always said, 'How can they! For so many years we lived with wonderful people, Ukrainians, in Rzhishev. They even said our names in Yiddish.' For, in those times if someone was called Chaim, it was pronounced as Chaim [the Jewish way of saying it], and not as Efim or something else. So, my mother was outraged by the fact that people could change so quickly: you have wonderful relations with someone and suddenly these relations are broken.