

Gendel Family Portrait



This is the Gendel family. Front row from left to right: my grandpa Isif, 47 years old; my grandma Rakhil, 42 years old; mom's younger brother Mendel, eleven years old. Second row from left to right: mom's brother Isaih, 16 years old; my mom Sofia, 20 years old; mom's elder brother Chaim, 25 years old.

I remember my maternal grandma very well. Her name was Rakhil – Jewish name Rokhl Leya – Gendeleva, nee Tseitlina. She was born in Nevel in 1871 and never left the town. She was as religious as my grandpa, she prayed a lot, attended the synagogue often, kept kosher, observed Sabbath and all Jewish holidays. As children we very often visited her on holidays and thus felt ourselves part of the Jewish community. Grandma also treated us to very delicious Jewish meals.

Grandma's mother tongue was Yiddish, she spoke this language to all adults. She spoke Russian to us, the children. We knew Yiddish, however, we could not speak it very well, but we could understand everything perfectly. Grandma didn't wear a wig, but always covered her hair with a headscarf. She wore a black lace shawl on holidays. She was a very beautiful woman, but her clothes were always very modest.

Grandma lived in a house of her own with three rooms and a large hall. The house had extensions and there was a shed and a vegetable garden near the house. Grandma kept a cow and was busy with the household. Peasants from neighboring villages, her acquaintances who knew her for many years, visited her and stayed in the house. She prepared dinner for them, cooked fish, since Nevel was a 'fish town.'

Nevel is located in a beautiful place. There is a big lake in the middle of the town, where young people spent a lot of time in summer, swam in the lake and went boating. A forest with a lot of mushrooms and berries surrounds the town, there are a lot of lakes; it is an area rich in lakes and fish. There were a lot of gardens in the town and a wonderful town park with brass band

performances and dancing during the weekend.

Nevel, the 'fish town,' supplied all surrounding regions and almost all Russian cities with fish. There was a lot of fish in Nevel's numerous lakes. Merchants arranged deliveries and sales of fish as well as exchange of fish for other goods. Up to ten people or even more visited my grandmother at times. This was her occupation – she had her own business, as they call it now. She had a housemaid, a Russian woman, who did all the housework during Sabbath and on Jewish holidays.

My grandparents had four children: Chaim, my mother Sofia, Isaih and Mendel. When Grandpa died all children were grownups.