

Yakov And Genessa Tseitlin



This picture was taken in Saratov in the 1880s. These are my paternal grandparents, Yakov and Genessa Tseitlin. They are apparently dressed up for the occasion.

My grandfather Yakov in particular was a craftsman specializing in many things. His basic trade was pitch-making, so he called himself a pitch-maker. This place in Belarus abounds in woods, so they were very much taken up with extracting pitch, turpentine and rosin. Grandfather was certainly the source of well being for his family. He was really a jack-of-all-trades, and Father, too, inherited all his skills.

It is enough to tell you that I remember as a small boy, how Grandfather fixed a broken samovar. One of our neighbors put on a samovar once. But someone had poured out all of the boiled water, and the coals continued to burn, and the samovar cracked at the seams. This made people upset. Grandfather comes out and says, 'I'll fix it.' 'How in God's name are you going to fix it?' 'It's very simple.'

I was a witness to that, a small boy while a big crowd gathered from all over and watched how he was going to repair a completely broken samovar. The pipe had split off the pot, it was all melted down. And Grandfather used the same live coals to fire up the solderer, because electricity was unheard of in the vicinity, soldered whatever required soldering and assembled the samovar in front of the entire crowd. Everybody gasped with surprise. It impressed me, too.

But Grandfather wasn't finished yet. He said, 'OK, I have put together the parts, but the thing has to be soldered from inside, that's why I'm going to cover it with tin from within.' And he showed us how to do it. He melted the tin right there in the fire, and prepared a broom in the meantime. I remember it all very well. I was about five years old then, it was shortly before Grandfather died. And he lined the insides of the samovar with tin. He sprinkled the melted tin on the broom and twirled it fast inside the samovar. Then he called to a man and said, 'Look to see if I have missed any place?' No, everything was just fine, lined all over. So, Father and Grandfather were mending, people were paying.

My grandmother on father's side was called Genessa. I remember trying to find out, as a small boy, what the Russian equivalent would have been. She was always very strict, I cannot remember if she ever laughed. And she brought up her kids along tough lines.

My grandmother, grandfather and parents were religious people. My grandmother did not change her habits during all her life; she baked challah on Fridays, in order to celebrate Sabbath, though she wore secular clothes every day. Both my grandparents and parents spoke mainly in Yiddish amongst themselves, and with us – only in Russian. All of them knew Russian.