

Moses Zelbert And The Soldiers Of Russian Army



These are the soldiers of Russian army, captured by Austrian army during World War 1. This is my father Moses Zelbert standing, the 5th in the top row, and the 4th is his friend Lev Gelzin. The picture was made in Reichenberg (Austria) in 1915.

Unfortunately, there is nothing I can say about my paternal grandparents. They died at a young age, when father was a kid. All I know is that grandfather's name was Samuel Zelbert. As for paternal grandmother, I even do not know her name. Father did not tell me much about his childhood. I do not know what grandfather did for a living. Grandmother was most likely a housewife as most married Jewish women. They lived in the town of Berdyansk, on the coast of Azov sea [Ukraine, 700 km away from Kiev]. There were five children in the family: the eldest child-daughter Rena and four sons: Markus, Isaac, Haim and my father Moses. Father was the youngest child in the family. He was born in 1892. I do not know when his siblings were born. When children became orphans, Rena became their foster parent. It is hard to say how they manage to survive, what money they lived on- father never spoke about it. All of them started to work early. Since childhood father ran errands for the owner of the footwear store. I do not know what education he got, but he was literate. I kept father's letters. They were written in good Russian. During his childhood he learnt how to play clarinet. I think father got Jewish education as well. At any rate, he had all praying paraphernalia- tallith, tefillin, prayer books. Father knew Ivrit. He was religious. He prayed at home, marked Sabbath and Jewish holidays.

When father reached drafting age, he was drafted in the tsarist army, where he served in the musicians' regiment. In father's words that regiment was even called to the palace of the Tsar of Livadia in Crimea and musicians played for the Tsar Nikolay II. When in 1914 World War I was unleashed, father and his regiment went to the front. He was in the orchestra. In late 1915 father was captured by Austrians and he was sent to the Austrian town Reichenberg together with other captives. They worked by some local hospital there. Judging by the pictures of that period of time, which my father managed to preserve, Russian captives lived pretty well there. Anyway they did not look meager in the photo. They looked rather funny. Father did not tell me much about his

captivity. He said that Austrians saw no difference between Jews and non-Jews. There was no anti-Semitism. Father and Jews-captives were not differentiated by Austrians in any way, they took them as Russian soldiers. Captives were not held for a long time, they were exchanged for Austrian captives. In 1916 my father was permitted to go home. He must have passed via Byelorussian village Smilovichi on his way to Berdyansk. He met mother there.

My parents got married in 1918. I do not know whether they had a traditional Jewish wedding. Maybe in Smilovichi, where they got married, Jewish traditions were strong even after the Revolution, when the Soviet regime oppressed any Jewish traditions. First, parents lived with grandmother and younger sisters. In 1922 I was born. I was called Batsheva. There was no room to swing a cat, when I was born and parents decided to go to father's motherland, Berdyansk. I think it was important for father that his eldest sister Rena lived there with her family. During childhood Rena was like mother to father and they were bonded. When I turned one year in December 1923 we moved to Berdyansk.