

Sofia Tsentsiper



This is my mother Sofia Tsentsiper in lyceum uniform. The photo was made in Dwinsk in 1907 on the graduation day. Photo saloon J. Klatkin, Dwinsk.

My mother's family lived in a Latvian town Kraziai. Their house was on the stately bank of the Western Dvina, abundant in pine trees. My maternal grandfather Leizer-Aba Tsentsiper was involved in wood processing, timber rafting and timber trade. There was a ferry by their house. It was the only way for the local inhabitants to cross the river. Grandfather derived a lot of profit from the ferry. I do not know anything about my maternal grandmother, not even her name. I know for sure that she was a housewife. There were four children in the family. My mother Eida-Sheina was born in 1890. My mother's Russian name was Sofia. Grandmother died young, when mother was a baby and mother's elder sister Esfir died shortly afterwards. Their deaths might have been caused by some sort of epidemic. Grandfather did not want to get married again, though he was not old. Grandmother's kin lived in Kraziai, viz. Her sister Beila and her husband, whose last name was Haimer. The spouses helped grandfather raise 3 orphaned children. The family was rather well-off. Grandfather made a lot of money. His house was open to friends. He generously helped them. I think the family was religious, which was traditional for those times. Grandfather clearly and fairly understood that apart from Jewish education children were supposed to get the secular one. The three of them finished lyceums. I do not know whether they went to Jewish lyceums. I know that mother was fluent in Yiddish, German and Russian. When the sons finished studies they started helping grandfather with the forestry.

I do not know how my parents met. All I know is that it happened in 1910. They got married on the 8th of February of 1912. My maternal grandfather made a traditional Jewish wedding in Kraziai. First they lived in grandfather's house and shortly after the wedding father was offered a job at the pipe mill in Poltava to work as a technician/builder. Parents moved to Poltava and in half year they moved to Ekaterinoslav, where father also worked in construction. There in 1913 the first child was born, Evsey. Daughter Esfir, named after early deceased sister of my mother, was born in 1915. I was born in 1918. I was named Rahil. My parents were rather well-heeled. Before revolution father got 110 golden rubles per month. It was a lot of money, if not by a coming change - the Revolution as of 1917.

In 1917 my father lost his job. It was the period of unrest, when construction workers were not needed. There was a total devastation. Then Civil War was unleashed. Father ought to earn money for the family so he decided to make soap. He boiled soap and cast them in bars. Mother and father sold the bars of soap on the market. Of course they did not yield that much profit, but it was enough to get by.

In 1919 there was the outbreak of cholera epidemic in Ekaterinoslav. People got sick and died. There was a serious unemployment. It was next to impossible to find a job. Father kept on making soap. Then he began buying tobacco from the peasants and resold it. Parents dried tobacco leaves, cut them and sold on the market. Then father managed to find a job at the metallurgic plant. He caught typhus fever during one of his trip to Kharkov. His distant relatives, who lived in Kharkov, looked after him. The Civil War was on and we and father were on different front lines. There were battles and artillery fire in Ekaterinoslav. We got used to the noise of the shells flying over our house. At night mother told us to lie down on the floor close to each other. She said if the shell was to hit our house, it would be better if all of us died at once.

We did not have fire wood, and the house was not heated. Mother caught cold. First she coughed and then hemoptysis started. The doctor said that she had a galloping consumption. I do not know how father found out about that but he crossed the front line. He was eager to treat my mom. He managed to get the medicine for her, fish liver oil, but nothing helped. Parents dreamt they would come to the pine forest and inhale the healing air. But these were only dreams. The war was on and we lived in the steppe part of Ukraine. In April 1921 my mother died at the age of 31. Evsey was going on the 7th year, Esfir was 5 and I was less than two. Mother was buried on the Jewish cemetery of Ekaterinoslav in accordance with the Jewish rite.