

Judith Begam



My mother Judith Begam. The photo was taken in Sevastopol in 1927. My mother went to the seashore on her vacation every summer and always sent us pictures from there. My mother studied in a Russian private grammar school for girls in Moscow. After finishing it she got a diploma of Teacher of History and Geography. She was a pretty girl and always had a number of admirers. She had her first romance when her family was living in Losinustrovskoye. They had a tenant, a poor student, who fell in love with my mother. He proposed to her, but my mother's father said, 'Are you out of your mind? Do you really want to marry this hobo?' This poor young man happened to be Marc Chagall. But then they took different roads. My mother's family moved to another neighborhood, and Chagall left the country soon afterwards. 40 years later he met my mother in Gorky Street and took her to his shop. They talked for a long time, recalling the time when they were young. My father met my mother in 1916, when he was very young. They got married in 1919. My mother married my father upon his insistence. They didn't have a wedding party. It was a hard time and my parents were far from religious. They had a civil ceremony and my grandmother cooked dinner for close relatives. Theirs was a marriage of convenience. He was the son of a millionaire and supposed to be rich. But after the Revolution of 1917 they lost all their property, and my father was treated with contempt in my mother's family. My father was always neatly dressed and well educated, but he couldn't get adjusted to reality. He couldn't find a job, and he didn't do anything in the house. Other members of the family called him 'duffer'. My mother didn't love my father and this attitude reflected on me. Two years after I was born my father left us. My mother's second husband, Abram Kutner, was a totally different man. He was a Jew from Odessa and once upon a time he was in the gang of Mishka Yaponchik. [Isaac Babel described this gang in his *Stories from Odessa*, where Yaponchik appeared under the name of Benia Krik.] During the Civil War quite a few members of the gang joined the Red Army. My mother met Abram Kutner in 1923 when he was chief of all military offices in the Central House of the Red Army in Moscow. He had a big belly, always wore his military trousers at home and shaved his head. He believed that he didn't have to continue his education and had reached everything he wanted in life.