

Matilda Ninyo's Family



This is the picture of my family in Karnobat. It was taken in 1931 at Pesach. The first person from the right to the left is my father's sister Rashel. Next to her are my father Mandil Levi and my mother Solchi Levi and then are Bela and Zhak. They are two of the children of my aunt Rashel. I am the first child on the right in the foreground.

My father Mandil Levi was born in Karnobat [a small town in eastern Bulgaria close to the Black Sea]. He was a wheat trader. Unfortunately, he died very young, when I was five years old and after that we haven't had many contacts with his relatives, because we left Karnobat, where I was born.

My father had a sister called Rashel, who lived in Karnobat with her three children, a son and two daughters - Zhak, Bela and Fortuna. Just like my mother Rashel was a widow. I have never known her husband, because he had died before I was born and I didn't know his name either. I only remember that we all lived in the same house. Her son Zhak became a wheat trader, just like my father and uncle Aron Levi, while he was still living in Karnobat. When he moved to Plovdiv this business was not very profitable and he shifted to shoe business. My uncle went to live in Plovdiv around the time when I was born so I don't remember seeing him in Karnobat. I think he had left for Karnobat before I was born.

Before my father died he and his brother Aron took care of their sister Rashel. This was very typical for the Jewish families, especially in this period. It was men who did better and it was they who took care of the women. I remember my aunt was very sad that my uncle left Karnobat; it seemed that

he was a great help for her family. When I visited them in 1946, Zhak was already a grown man and he was already married. It was he who took care of the family. All of them moved to Israel in 1949. Unfortunately, I haven't been in touch with them ever since.

Our house in Karnobat was a very big one, with two storeys. As far as I know, it was built by my grandfather Yako Levi. My father was born there. This is the picture I recall: my father sitting on the top of a ladder, trimming the grape vine in the yard. There were many Jewish people in Karnobat and my family was in touch mainly with them. In Karnobat we had the custom to get together on holidays not only with relatives but also with the closest family friends. For example, our frequent guests were widowed and single persons; those who didn't have where to go for the holiday. It was considered great sin if you didn't share your Pesach holiday with anyone. We would even leave the door open on this day, so the lonely strangers were welcome to come. We would always have a lot of guests at Pesach. I was very little when we left the town, so I don't remember the ordinary life of the Jews there. My aunt and her children lived in our house. As a whole, I don't remember much of my father's life, because I was told more about my mother's family.

My mother Solchi Levi (nee Danon) was born in the town of Burgas. This town was considered superior and far more sophisticated than Karnobat those years. She graduated from the high school in the town of Trigrad [in the Rhodopes Mountain]. There she lived in a boarding-house. All her lessons there were taught in French. She spoke French, Turkish and Greek fluently. She could read books in Spanish. Later when she left for Israel, she learnt Ivrit very quickly.

My parents' first meeting was very interesting. Mom was a beautiful thin tall woman. My brother looked like her. One day she went to a fair in Karnobat. This fair must have been arranged for showing the cattle and it must have taken place once a year. As far as I know, she went there with a friend of hers. Karnobat was near Burgas and it was not difficult for them to go there. My mother was not a little girl any more then. She was dressed elegantly, wearing high heels. Accidentally, she tripped on the stone pavement and she broke one of the heels. She got angry, promising herself never to come to the fair in Karnobat again. My father noticed her this very moment and he told himself: 'This woman will be my wife!' Mom was then to get engaged to a German Jew, called Freedman, who was living in Burgas. Dad sent a matchmaker several times asking for her hand. She would refuse every time. Then her father decided to talk to the German and find out more about his intentions. My mother thought it would be very rude if Freedman was treated this way. That is why she took the initiative and told him about the proposal she received from the man from Karnobat, but he did nothing about it. In the mean time my father was persistent in proposing her marriage. Finally, she consented, so did my grandfather. At the end, my mother went back to Karnobat despite the promise she had made. The tradition was the bride's family to give dowry to the groom. It's interesting that my father didn't insist on any dowry from my mother's family.