

Riva Birger



This is my mother Riva Birger. The picture was taken on her birthday in Jonava in 1935.

My mother Riva Benisevich was my father's cousin. At that time incestuous unions were rather common. Maternal grandmother Haya was grandmother Shifra's sister. My maternal grandfather Alter Benisevich was a cabman. At that time cabmen considered to be the lowest class in the conventional hierarchy of craftsmen. Grandfather Alter and grandmother Haya were illiterate, but very religious. I remember Alter very well. He was a tall sinewy man. He seemed old to me though in the 1930s he was not more than sixty. He had a long beard and wore a cap or a hat. Grandmothers Haya and Shifra wore head kerchiefs. I had never seen them with their heads uncovered. They wore long dark dresses even in summer.

Children in grandfather Alter's family were not educated either. The three daughters, had helped grandmother Haya about the house since early childhood. Grandfather needed a hand as well. In summer it was necessary to procure the forage for the horses. My mother and sisters mowed hay. My mother had two sisters. One of them Vera, born in 1904, remained single. She lived with her parents and helped grandmother about the house. Later when my mother got married, Vera started helping her.

My parents got married in 1930. They went under chuppah in the synagogue. They had a wedding party in grandfather Alter's wedding. There were very many people as newly-weds had common relatives. I was born on the 3rd of March 1931. I was named after my grandfather Samuel Iosif and that name was written in my birth certificate issued by rabbi. In 1933 mother gave birth to a son Natan. The family called him tenderly Notke. In 1936 my brother Gershko was born.

Our family lived in a large house with mother's parents. It was not our place, we rented two large apartments. Our rooms were to the right from the entrance and grandfather Alter and grandmother Haya lived to the left from us. The landlord of the house was old believer Aleksandrov. Our family occupied two rooms. We, boys, slept in one of them. We had good wooden beds. The youngest Gershko slept in a cradle in the parents' bedroom - it was a lighter and cozier room. There was a round table in the middle of the room. There was also a leathern couch, small bookcase with few books. There was nobody to read them as parents were illiterate. Grandfather Alter and grandmother Haya occupied two smaller rooms. One of them was a drawing-room and another narrow one like a pencil - box was their bedroom. The most spacious was the kitchen of 50 square meters. There was a large Russian stove and tables there. There was a large round table in the middle of the kitchen. The whole family dined there on Sabbath and holidays. We marked all Jewish holidays. Usually the whole family including grandfather Alter with grandmother Haya, aunt Leya with her family and aunt Vera got together in our large kitchen.

There was an orchard in front of the house. There were fruit trees, chestnuts, black currant and gooseberry bushes. The stables of my father and grandfather Alter were in the heart of the orchard. There were five big dray horses in the stables. Grandfather owned three of them.