

Naum Len Among His Relatives



Family of Lens from left to right: Gitsa (Eugenia) Len - grandmother, Yakov - my father - as a boy, Maria - Yakov's sister, Naum Len - grandfather, Samuel - Yakov's brother, Khenik Skurnik - grandmother's brother.

This studio snapshot was made in 1922 in the times of NEP [new economic policy]. Grandfather Naum was a nepman, a dealer. The family was well to do, we are all well dressed.

Grandfather is wearing a good suit and a tie called "butterfly", grandmother has beautiful decorations on her neck and chest. There is an opened book on the table in front of granddad. In those times it was considered a good form to make a family snapshot on which head of the family was holding a book in his hands, as a symbol of education.

My ancestors on father's line came from Poland. My grandfather on father's side, who was called Naum Yakovlevich Len in the Russian way, had the original name Khaim Nukhem Len. He was born in Poland, in a small Jewish town of Vogyn in Radzynsky district in 1888. He was from a well to do family.

In 1916 the First World War was going on, so he took his wife, my grandmother, and their two sons - Yakov, born in 1910, and Samuel, born in 1915, and left for Russia. As far as I know from the stories of my relatives, he wanted to reach America and to settle down there, but the war was going on in Europe, and he remained in Russia.

In 1920 he lived in Samara , where his daughter Maria was born. During the period of NEP [new economic policy] he became a nepman, a dealer, he had enough money, owned a business and their house was very well furnished, as I was told. Children were taught languages and music.

All that came to an end when NEP was cancelled. Grandfather was sent to a labour camp for "reeducation" because he was a nepman: to fell trees in Perm district. Grandmother formally divorced him, as was customary then, and moved to Leningrad with children in 1929. Having come back from timber cutting, grandfather worked at the shoe factory "Skorokhod" as a cutter.

He was of a very robust constitution and strong physically; he also had, as they say, a Slavonic appearance, light eyes, light hair, 185 centimetres tall. His considerable physical strength allowed him to be a cutter of footwear. Grandfather's native language was Yiddish, he didn't speak Russian very well and had a pronounced Jewish accent. When people met him in the streets, they often thought he was a spy with a bad command of Russian.

He was quite religious, but not a conformist. I was subjected to the customary circumcision in 1938. You can understand how Jewish traditions were observed in the family even in those hard years. Granddad received religious education in his birthplace in Poland. He knew very well the history of his people, traditions of the Jewish nation and observed them. I was small and can not remember more details.