

Solomon Epstein's Grandfather And His Family



This photograph taken in 1900s in Vitebsk shows my maternal grandfather and his family.

Here I'd like to tell you about my ancestors.

I know nothing about my great-grandparents. My paternal and maternal grandfathers were born and lived in Belarus near Vitebsk. My maternal grandfather's name was Ruman. As far as I understand, he was a tzaddik of the local community.

He had got several daughters. My paternal grandfather lived about 60 kilometers far from Vitebsk - in Velizh. My grandfather Ruman was short and rather weak, very kind and silent, and my grandfather Hirsh-Leyb-Meir Epstein was a joker, a horse-lover. He was very tall and black-haired (looked like a gypsy), very cheerful. Both grandfathers were very kind.

Grandfather Hirsh had got many children, and not only girls. He was engaged in carrying goods between Velizh and Vitebsk. He got acquainted with grandfather Ruman and his family somehow. Ruman was a tailor and grandfather Hirsh sent his son Boris (Berele) to Ruman as an apprentice.

That was the way Berele found his love (my future Mom). I keep his love-letter written in 1916. The letter was written in Russian, and the first letters of lines spelled my mother's name Ester.

By that time Daddy had finished 4 or 5 classes of gymnasium and knew Russian well, though my both grandfather's mother tongue was certainly Yiddish.

My father was a very talented person, a real artist of tailoring. Later in Leningrad he became one of the most famous local tailors. People of high position (now we call them VIP) lined up to get his services.

They paid him much money, because everybody knew him to be a magician able to turn an ordinary person into a real picture. He was left-handed to no profession: a furrier, a glover, and even a shoemaker.

I do not remember my grandmothers very well. Grandmother Rachel, Ruman's wife wore a wig and I remember her bald head under the wig. When it became clear that my hair became shockingly red, everybody said that it was passed down from my grandmother (she was red-headed).

Haya was Hirsh's wife. She was a person of cast-iron character, completely different from her husband. But here it is necessary to take into account that she had to take care of a large family, and it was not easy: Hirsh traveled much and his family was not a burden for him.

Last year I made portraits of my grandfathers from memory. For the last time I saw them at the age of two and a half (by the way, I have no photos of grandfather Hirsh).

At the same time I am absolutely sure that in my picture my grandfather looks real, I felt like giving birth to him by means of my brush. I kept a photo of grandfather Ruman, but strangely enough it distracted me from my work. I put it aside and did not look at it during my work on his portrait.

My parents got married in Vitebsk in 1921. Both my brother and I were born there, too. David was born in 1923, and I was born in 1925.