

Portraits of My Mother and My Father

By Jacob Gorelick

(reprinted from The Forward, October 26, 1980)

MY MOTHER

*“My quiet, lonely lily,
A dream of childhood years.”*

To the wonderful verses of Moshe Taif’s poem, “My Mother,” I would add another metaphor, ‘the quiet dove’; then the description would almost become a silhouette of my own dear mother.

She had a golden voice, and her singing was like the sound of a flute and violin in harmony.

She used to sing Yiddish folksongs in the minor key which made me feel very sad.

When I grew older, I realized why her songs were so sad. My mother was orphaned as a young child, and her life had been hard. In addition, she suffered for years from migraine headaches.

She was a great “beryeh,” and although my father was not a great provider, she managed, on their small income, to feed and clothe the family, to pay in installments the “cheder” tuition fees for her only son, and not forget alms to the needy.

A quiet dove was my mother, and seldom did she raise her voice or punish her children, whom she loved greatly. We were three girls and one boy. Later, when three of the children left for America, she wept bitterly and said, “With each child that goes away goes part of my heart.”

On the Sabbath and holidays, my mother’s sad face was transformed. She put on her Yom Tov dress her face glowed, and I felt that she was the most beautiful mother in the whole world!

MY FATHER

*“And about our own fathers,
We, know all,
Know nothing at all.”*
(Yevgeni Yevtushenko)

My father was one of the “Whole Jews” of bygone days who lived a shtetl life of simplicity, justice and righteousness; he was quiet, modest, a hard worker, very pious, a silent giver of charity ell in all a prototype of Peretz’s story, “If Not Even Higher.”

Now in retrospect, I am beginning to know and understand him better than I did in my childhood. He spent seven years in America, and returned to the shtetl because the American observation of all Jewish religion was not at all to his liking. He left for America just after I was born and came back when I was a boy in “cheder.”

My father strongly believed in good deeds to one’s fellow man, such as helping the needy and sick. On “Shyer” Street in the shtetl, in a little hut, lived a scholarly Jew; he was poor and paralyzed and could not leave his bed. My father often used to go to him to wash and feed him.

As a Sabbath guest, my father used to bring home the poorest and sickest man, one whom no one would have wanted.

My father had knowledge of the Torah and commentaries; just before daybreak, when it was still dark, he used to get up and say the Psalms of David from memory, without turning on the lamp.

The people of the shtetl respected my father for his piety, honesty, and goodness.

In 1942, the Nazi murderers killed my father and my mother, along with all the fathers, mothers, and children in the Shchedrin ghetto.

Translated from the Yiddish
By HELEN GEBERER

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(retyped by Andrew I. Sverdlove June 8, 2005)

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