



# Beba Epstein Autobiography – 1933-1934

TRANSLATED FROM YIDDISH BY MYRA MNIEWSKI

Beba Epstein wrote her autobiography during the 1933-34 school year, when she was attending primary school at the Sofia Gurevich school in Vilna, Poland. She was 11 or 12 years old at the time.

I didn't have anything more to do there and wanted to start school already.

## THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

I started school when I was 6 years old.

One morning my mother told me she was going to register me at the S. M. Gurevitch School. Naturally I went with her. The school was on Makowa Street. We were cordially greeted on the steps of the school by a short woman with white hair and blue eyes. I was enrolled, told to come the next day and we went home.

The next day I began first grade. Our teacher was Ms. Szabad. She was a very warm and lovely woman. It was easy to be a good student with her. We loved Ms. Szabad.

On Fridays Ms. Szabad would read us a story at the end of the day. We would also often go for walks.

In 2nd grade, Polish was added to our curriculum. Ms. Szabad was still our teacher but a new teacher, Ceszalam, taught us Polish. I continued to be a good student. On Mondays in the summer we would go to Zakret for two-hour excursions. We often had events in the evenings in which I took an active part.

Later, when I moved on to third grade, I encountered a lot of new students. We still had the same teachers but two new subjects were added: Nature and Geography. I began reading a lot.

I was a sickly child and because of my many illnesses I missed a lot of school. That summer I didn't go to the country on vacation, but I did go to the Ts.E.K. camp in Nowa Wilejka. It was very nice there. We swam, sunbathed, went on walks and sang. I was visited every week.

Our studies resumed as soon as I got back from the colony and I entered fourth grade with a clear mind. But that year, Ms. Szabad, due to personal circumstances, no longer taught us. We were very sad about that but Ms. Szabad did not forget us—she often came to visit us at school. We got another teacher, Mr. Rabinovitch. He at first was very nice and immediately organized an event in which we performed Peretz' *Shulamis*. But later Mr. Rabinovitch got strict and then even stricter.

After Mr. Rabinovitch's arrival we experienced more distress: our wonderful principal, Sofia Markovna Gurevitch, had to leave us forever to go to the Soviet Union. A special event in her honor, a banquet, was organized by parents and friends.

That year I was very sick with various illnesses like: grippe, bronchitis, angina, mumps. In addition to that my nose and throat were always bothering me and I was always going to doctors. I was also near-sighted and used to go to the university clinic to see doctors and professors in the hopes of a cure. My illnesses were detrimental to my studies because I missed a lot of school. It was decided not to promote me to fifth grade because I had missed so much and was young.

That summer I again went to a summer camp in Borowe. I was there for a month and practically got all better. My second year of fourth grade was not very interesting to me because I had already learned it the year before. I was a good student. That year I read a lot. But that year [truncated sentence]

## MY PARENTS

### My Father's Parents

My grandfather, David Epstein was born in Smorgon in 1854. He died at 81 in 1934, on November 7th. He was a very religious man. He was so *frum* [religious, observant] that he even slept with a hat on. He was a shipping clerk who had worked at his trade for 50 years. He was also the *gabay* [warden], at Zavls synagogue for 30 years and in the *Folks-kloyz* [peoples' shul] for 50 years. He was a quiet man who didn't talk much and never laughed—a guy who never smiled, a *mruck*, a killjoy. Last year when we were all sitting at the table eating, my little brother said to my mother, 'Mama, does *zeyde* know how to laugh?' One time my cousin's friend came over and asked my sister, if *zeyde* was mute. All that because no one ever heard a word out of him. But among the religious Jews he had a good reputation. They used to call him 'Little King David'.

He was about the same size as me, had blue eyes and a white beard. He was a very knowledgeable scholar who spent whole days in the prayer hall. He was also well educated—knowing Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, German and Polish. He never spoke ill of anyone. When ever anyone gossiped he would say: 'Stop jabbering, talk about yourself—you'll have more to say.'

## MY GRANDMOTHER

My grandmother, Khaye Kroyne Epstein (nee Bayer), was from Vilna. She lived on Dayshe St., was born in 1859 and died in 1932 at 74.

She was *frum* but not as *frum* as *zeyde*. She wasn't a very nice person either, a shopkeeper who worked her entire life. She also, was educated. She knew practically everyone in town. She was very tall, thin, and strong, never having been sick for 35 years—until the last three years of her life. She had fallen in the kitchen, broke her foot, laid down in bed, and didn't get up for three years. Everything possible was done to cure her, but to no avail. After much suffering she died.

## MY MOTHER'S PARENTS

### My Grandmother

My grandmother Khane Senitzki (nee Adelson), was born in 1874 in the Lithuanian town of Butreymants. She was married at 18 in Vilna to Abba Senitzki. They lived on Zavalne 66 and had a spice store. She was the shopkeeper. She had four children, 2 boys and 2 girls. My grandmother wasn't overly rich but had enough to make do and was a *baleboste*, an excellent homemaker. She was energetic and clever, read a lot and was a great storyteller. She was also good at sewing and knitting. They later moved to Zavalne 38.

It was very hard for them during the war—no one earned any money. There were days when there was combat in the streets. To go out or even look out the window was forbidden. There wasn't always food in the house and their prospects were bleak. Many diseases erupted during the war. That's when my father got typhus.

My grandmother was short and stocky, had silver hair and blue eyes. She had a weak heart and was very frail.

## MY GRANDFATHER

My grandfather Abba Senitzki was born in 1866 in Navaredok. He married at 26. He worked as a hired man, was very *frum* and sickly all his life—always short of breath. He was very smart and very knowledgeable about cantorials. Whenever a cantor arrived in town his opinion was always sought after. He had been to Russia and Latvia. He always wanted the children to be educated and always gave them money for books and writing tablets. Zeyde always accompanied my mother when she went shopping for arts and crafts supplies. When the new school year approached and the schools had issued their lists of required books, Zeyde would gather his rubles and go to Itzkowitz' to buy all the children their needed materials.

Zeyde was very supportive of the children's schooling, but not when they were sick, only when they were healthy and strong. The year I had to redo the fourth grade because I had been sick and missed a lot of school my mother went to consult him about me, about what she should do. He told her: Listen Malke! (That's my mother's name.) Let her do the year over, it won't hurt, so she'll become a *rebetsin*, a rabbi's wife, a year later!' When Mama heard what Zeyde had to say I was left back.

My *zeyde* is a thin man of medium stature, with black eyes, a sparse, little black beard, and black hair mixed with grey. When Zeyde comes in from the street he stammers and is out of breath. I used to be afraid of him.

## MY PARENTS

### My Father

My father, Shimon Epstein, was born in Vilna in 1889. He is now 45 years old. At 32, he married Malke Senitzki. Like all boys of that time, my father went to *kheyder*. When he got older he was sent to

*Kamertshiske utshilishtye*, a boarding school. Later Papa began helping Zeyde in shipping. At 21 he went off to serve in Turkestan and later, Tashkent. He served there for three years and eight months. Aside from officers, generals and other military men of high rank, there were only peasants serving in Turkestan making Papa the most educated in their ranks. For that reason he became their administrator. Papa had no desire to go on maneuvers with them, so he would think of excuses, like having to go to another town on some military business. There was no one else to send, so Papa would be the one to go. He would then linger there for a while and by the time he got back everyone had already left on maneuvers. He would then just stay in town. That's how he got out of maneuvers and was never punished.

After his military service he went to Vilna. He was only here for a few months before he was drafted to serve in the world war, which he did for four years, on the Rumanian and Russian fronts. He was a baker on the front for several months. That was a good job. Papa was also on the Austrian front fighting the Austrians. He also fought the Bulgarians and the Germans on the Rumanian front. He was at a bunch of fronts in Russia fighting the Germans. He took every precaution to avoid being taken prisoner because the Germans tortured their prisoners. He was in huge battles where tens of thousands perished and where cities and towns were burned to the ground. The Russian military was always retreating because the Germans, who were very organized and well armed, were always driving them into retreat.

Papa's unit was constantly being sent from front to front. The last leg of their service was in Rumania, where the war ended.

When the war ended Papa went to Odessa from Rumania where he spent a year. From Odessa he went to Poltava for a short time. Then he went to Minsk, and from Minsk came back to Vilna. The Germans were there when he returned and then later the Poles. He worked at a cooperative and changed jobs from time to time. Mama had several children who are still alive.

## **MY MOTHER**

My mother Malke Epstein (nee Senitzki) was born in Vilna in 1894. When she was 8 years old she was sent to Pra-Gymnazye in Funk. Mother was very capable—a very good student who made beautiful arts and crafts. She also took classes in Hebrew which was called 'Yehudi' and were taught by the principal, Notiks Foter. Mother knew Hebrew and read books and magazines.

At 16 Mother began earning money keeping the books for a store. She worked there for a while and then moved to a mill where she worked until she had 2 children. She married when she was 27 in 1921.

## **THE WAR YEARS**

Mother suffered a lot during the war. She was the only one in her family that was able to earn money. They suffered hunger because the food the Germans provided was inedible. House searches were often conducted and her brothers and father would get arrested for several days.

Later the situation at home improved a bit because Mom's younger brother gradually began to get work.

There were days when battles took place in the streets. Because of the fighting outside it was forbidden to go out into the streets or even look out the windows. You weren't allowed to keep a fire going inside and the windows had to be covered. There wasn't much food and things were pretty bad. The Germans would give the populace the same sugar they gave their horses. On top of that each household had to board soldiers.

## **POST WAR YEARS**

After the war Mother worked at the same bookkeeping job at the mill. In 1921, she got married. She worked up until she had 2 children. She always dreamed of going to Russia but nothing ever came of it. She remained in Vilna and had 4 children—two attend the Sofia Gurevitch Folkschool—one is in 5th grade, Beba Epstein, and one in third grade, Esye Epstein.

## **MY BROTHERS AND SISTER**

I have one sister and two brothers. My sister's name is Esye. She's 9½, born in 1924. My first brother, Mote is 5½, born in 1929. And my last brother, Khayim, is 1½, born in 1933.

## **MY SISTER ESYE**

My sister Esye is quite tall. She's pale and has brown eyes and black hair. She is very beautiful. She has a good heart but is a bit high strung. She is very weak. A year doesn't go by when she's not well. She does very well in school and loves to sew. She plays the piano and is a gifted dancer. She likes to pretend she knows everything and can do anything. When I play checkers with her she'll sometimes try to cheat but she eventually loses. She's very cheerful and a good student. She can mimic all the leading actors. She is currently in the 3rd grade.

## **MY BROTHER MOTE**

My brother Mote is a happy boy. Horses are gods to him—he can spend the whole day playing at horses. We refer to him as the 'horsey soul'. He's only nice to whom he wants to be. For example, he's always fighting with me, swiping me with willow shoots. He does exactly the same to my younger sister. He's a big *nasher*. He loves horses, cats, dogs and chickens. Motke is very eager to attend school but is still too young.

## **MY BROTHER KHAYIML**

My brother Khayiml is adorable. He looks like a little girl because he wears dresses. He's chubby but is already a very good walker. He's tallish, has a wide nose, blue eyes, blond hair and a cute little mouth. He doesn't talk very well yet. His only words are: mama, papa, tata, lala, baba, etka. I love him very much.

## **ME MYSELF**

I was born in Vilna in 1922, on July 19th.

I was a very weak child from the beginning and not chubby. When it was time to feed me, Papa would sit down beside me on one side and Mama on the other. They would tell me a story and as I listened I opened my mouth, giving them the opportunity to pour food into it.

One thing for sure—I was a big brat. I broke and ruined everything. At two, I climbed up on the sideboard where there was always a runner with lots of dishes on it. When I grabbed onto it all the dishes came crashing down and they all broke. I started crying because I thought I was going to be yelled at. But instead everyone laughed, until I too finally started laughing.

I loved to tear up notebooks. Once when my cousin was 13, she had handed in a geography assignment. Her teacher, Ms. Freydkes, thought it was the best in the class and asked her to neatly copy it over at home. My cousin brought it home, carefully wrote it over and went off to a friend's house. When she returned that evening her entire notebook was ripped to shreds. She began yelling at me, but I didn't understand. The next day she was given a letter to her teacher, Ms. Freydkes, explaining it wasn't her fault.

I could barely wait for summer when we would go to the country. Riding the train was the most thrilling thing. At the *datshe* I would run freely along the roads, once almost getting run over. I'd always be standing at the gate of our yard and whenever a peasant women passed I would yell: *co pani ma do spadenia*, do you have anything to sell?

I loved to swim, but where we were in Kana, the river was far, so I rarely went. When I was still very little Zeyde convinced me that you had to be very *frum*, or else God would strike you into hell with iron rods, so I was very *frum*—I *bentsht likht* and said *brokhes*, blessed candles and recited prayers. If I committed a sin I tried to hide it so God wouldn't see. When I was little I loved being read to and I very quickly learned to read and write Yiddish. At five I went to the Shevelovitch Kindergarten. There I met Sheva. I loved going to kindergarten. I was in the older group and learned to count, sing, dance and Yiddish. I was a major player in the many plays we put on. I was a sickly child so Mother would give the teacher cod liver oil to give me.

## THE FIRST TIME I WENT TO THE MOVIES

The first time in my life I went to the movies I was 4½ years old. We saw Uncle Tom's Cabin. I had no trouble understanding the picture but I needed some explanation about it. Since then I go to the movies often.

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One time when Bobe and I were sitting at the window, we saw a funeral procession going by on our street. I said to her: 'Bobe, when you die will you take me with you?' That made Bobe have a good laugh.

I went to kindergarten for a year but I missed a lot because I would get headaches. I also had a very serious illness: chicken pox. The doctor said that a case like mine happens only once in 7 years. I was sick with it for 5 weeks. That was when my little brother was born.

This year I was promoted to fifth grade without having to take the exam. I am a good student. But we get

a lot of homework and I work on it till late at night. My studies are currently very interesting to me. We go on excursions often—we've been to Karolinka and Vereck. We are now putting on *Motl Peysi dem Khasn's* for the second time. We go to the movies often with school. I also go on my own quite often—to the movies and the theatre.

I was sick this year with a serious case of angina and missed a performance because of it. Now I have to focus on fixing my teeth. That's not much fun. I might go to the Ts.E.K summer camp again this summer.

I'm working hard in school because I have to be promoted to 6th grade.

## MY CHARACTERISTICS

I am rather tall, have blue eyes and chestnut hair. I'm nice to—it depends who. If someone's nice to me then I'll be nice to them. I'm not very kind to my brother for example, because he's horrible to me. He swipes my knees with switches, pinches me and generally hits me all the time. It's the opposite with my sister, I get along well with her because she is nice, like me. I'm also nice to my girlfriends. I don't like fighting and hardly ever do it.

Back when I was little I used to sometimes enjoy telling a lie and teasing. I very, very rarely hurt anyone with a bad word. I don't do it anymore though. I'm older and by now I understand it isn't a nice thing to do. I would also sometimes betray someone but not anymore. At home Mother says I'm stubborn but I don't agree. When it's cold Mama tells me to put on warm clothes but I say I'm warm and want to wear my summer dress. That's when she says I'm stubborn. I love to read but I prefer Yiddish books to Polish ones. I get very upset when I see someone tormenting a living thing. My little brother used to pull our cat's tail. I couldn't stand seeing that so I would run off to my room.

I like sports: ice skating, swimming, gymnastics. I like active games.

I am very loved at home, but they don't spoil me—only when I'm sick—then I get special privileges.