

Dezider Sever With His Family On Holidays In Betlanovce



This is a picture of us on holidays in Betlanovce. Standing on the left is the Christian nanny that my sister and I had. Beside the nanny, leaning on a cane is my mother Pavla Severova (then Silbersteinova, nee Löwyova), and standing beside my mother is my father, Dezider Sever (then Silberstein) with me in his arms. The older lady with the cane standing beside my father is my paternal grandmother, Maria Silbersteinova (nee Hexnerova), and standing beside her is her sister.

During visits and summer holidays that I spent at their place, I had the opportunity to come into contact with religious life; my grandparents were truly Orthodox Jews. They were both from Betlanovce, which is a small village near the Tatra Mountains in the Spisska Nova Ves region. My grandmother's family had originally come from the Iberian Peninsula. The Hexner family left Spain when the Jews were being expelled from there at the end of the 15th century. They had originally wanted to settle in the Czech lands, but there was a law in effect here that a Jewish family could have at most perhaps only two children, so they settled in Slovakia. In their case it was a necessity, as they had a terribly large number of children! So my father used to crack jokes on this subject, though it was actually no joke, it was reality - when people asked him how it was possible that all those Hexners were one and the same family, he answered, 'It's like this: once there was this Hexner and he had twelve sons, each of those sons also had twelve sons, and those also twelve, twelve and twelve sons, and all of them are my relatives...' But I guess there's some truth to it, because the Hexners really were very numerous. Unfortunately, most of these relatives of mine died during the war in concentration camps, all of my cousins, aunts and uncles... I know of just one great-great-uncle, Erwin Paul Hexner, who immigrated to America and became a famous economist. From this whole large, branching family, only this one uncle survived. Betlanovce was a small town, where Grandma and Grandpa had a small general store. Grandma and Grandpa had a farm that they worked on. There was no synagogue in Betlanovce, or in the surrounding villages, so my grandparents decided to have one built. They initiated and financed its construction, so thanks to them there's a synagogue in Betlanovce. I figure this was probably sometime during the 1920s. Jewish customs were observed in the family of my paternal grandparents; they cooked kosher food, separated their dishes for various foods and holidays, attended synagogue, and lived an Orthodox lifestyle. I was a child, so I don't remember any details that clearly, but I do remember that my cousins, sister and I were always at my grandparents' during summer holidays, and had the opportunity to familiarize ourselves with true Jewish sentiments. We were still kids, so we often got things wrong, and then Grandma and Grandpa had to correct our mistakes, so I remember that we had to stick knives into the ground, where they had to stay for several days so everything would be ritually clean again. Unfortunately, the idyllic summer vacations and carefree childhood at my grandma and grandpa's ended when I was eight. The Slovak State began, all those horrors and the persecution of Jews, and we stopped going to see our grandma and grandpa. Our parents had other worries, they had to worry about what to do, to hide whom where, how to survive. Starting at age eight, I was never in Betlanovce again. My father's entire family died in concentration camps. My father managed to save Grandma from the transport, he hid her in Bratislava until 1944, but in the end the transport didn't miss her, and she died in Auschwitz. I don't know the details of Grandma's hiding and subsequent arrest, I was too small to remember it; what's more, for a long time after the war, I had no desire to talk to anyone about wartime events.