

Mikhail Efimovich Medvedev (Meer Haimovich Bernshtein) On Stage



This photo shows Mikhail Efimovich Medvedev (Meer Haimovich Bernshtein), famous opera singer who was the cousin of my grandfather, onstage in one of his roles.

Meer was born in July 1858 in Blaya Zerkov, near Kiev, the son of a poor rabbi and cantor named Haim Bernshtein who had married the sister of my great-grandfather Nohum Yasnogorodsky.

Bernshtein traveled with his family around the Pale of Settlement in search of work, living in various communities. It was on these travels that Meer began a lifelong friendship with the writer Sholom Aleichem, who dedicated an entire chapter of his book "From the Market" to him: "Meer from Medvedevka."

From childhood Meer had a wonderful voice and wanted to study music, but his father didn't have enough money to enable this. The boy's uncle, my great-grandfather Nohum Yasnogorodsky, who was a well-known song-writer and journalist in Kiev, came to the rescue. He used his contacts to place Meer in the Kiev Musical Academy when the boy was 17.

In 1878 Nikolai Grigorievich Rubinshtein, the director of the Moscow Conservatory, came to Kiev to recruit students. He was so impressed by Meer's talent that he invited him to Moscow to study. In order to further his career, Meer (like many Jews at the time) changed his name.

He chose Mikhail Efimovich Medvedev, taking the surname from the name of one of the little provincial towns where his family had lived - Medvedevka. Meer's mother tongues were Yiddish and Ukrainian, so at first he sang in Russian with accent.

Medvedev's career took off when he played the part of Lenskii in the opera "Evgenii Onegin," by Peter I. Tschaikovsky. The premiere was held in March 1879 at the Malay Theatre in Moscow. Medvedev continued studying at the conservatory while working at the theater.

After graduating in 1881, he returned to his beloved Kiev where he quickly became an idol. He sang in Moscow at the Bolshoi Theatre, at the Marinsky in St. Petersburg, in Kharkov, in the Caucasus, and all along the Volga River. His repertoire of roles was great: Othello, Don Juan, Faust...

He won his greatest success and worldwide fame, however, in the role of German in Tchaikovsky's "The Queen of Spades." At a performance in Kiev, Tchaikovsky came out for a curtain call with Medvedev. He presented Medvedev with a score of the opera and a gold watch with the inscription "The best German."

In 1898, Medvedev left for a triumphal tour of North America. After returning to Russia he devoted himself to teaching. Starting in 1901, he was a professor at the Moscow Philharmonic Community. After a few years he returned to Kiev where he worked as an educator at the operatic theater.

In 1912 he was invited to take up the post of professor of voice at the Saratov Conservatory. It was the first conservatory in the provinces. Among his students was Lydiya Ruslanova, who was to become a famous singer. Medvedev lived in Saratov until the end of his life. He suffered a heart attack and died after a concert on August 1, 1925.