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Bath's Jews, 1930-1975: Coping with Modernity
by Nathan Cogan

This essay focuses on the 2nd generation born in America to Eastern European Jewish immigrants who settled in Bath in the period 1900-1920. First, a confession: originally I began this essay on the assumption that when I left Bath in the mid-Fifties most of my generation had also left Bath. But I was wrong. What I discovered statistically is that about half of my cohort actually remained in Bath after returning from WWII and/or college. Only by the 1980's did they and/or their children move on, typically, to Portland. But before I talk about the generation that stayed in Bath—that is, the “renewal” generation-- I would like to rehearse briefly the history of Bath's first Jewish community in its transition from Eastern European roots to the commercial, shipbuilding world of Bath, a Yankee Protestant town experiencing 20th Century cultural and social changes—the two wars, the Depression, and modernization. I do not intend to reprise the 50 page “Memoir of Bath Jews” which I completed eighteen months ago. Indeed here I will explore how the “renewal” generation flourished in Bath up through 1980 or so despite the 50% exodus that co-occurred between 1935 and 1960, including several large families leaving wholesale, or simply siblings leaving for greener pastures.

The first settler Isaac Mikelski had come to Bath in 1886; later, in the decade 1900-1910, via Boston a wave of about ten settlers-- all peddlers and not always with families-- came to Bath. By 1922—the year the shul came into creation—about 20 families had set up stores, some had bought homes, but universally they retained Yiddish, kept kosher, saved their money, urged their children to study hard, and worked six days a week including the Jewish Sabbath. The men who ran shops dressed in suits, did not wear beards, or

yarmulkes on the street; women did not wear *sheitls*. They sent their kids on to college, their daughters going consistently to Boston to finishing schools and colleges so they could marry a professional. Most had a son or daughter who served in WWII.

Most of the original 20 or so shop keepers thrived on the war industry. Three occupations dominated: grocery and meat; clothing, shoes, and tailoring; and furniture and appliances. Uniformly industrious, most owned their own stores, with husbands and wives managing together. By 1950 two larger commercial operations emerged: one, Praver's wholesale produce company and the Congress Sportswear Company, managed by a childless German-Jewish pre-Holocaust survivor. There were also four doctors' offices, one lawyer, three tailor shops. Nathan Press uniquely managed one of the two movie houses through 1948, though his family characteristically was a less than one decade "stopover" family. By 1950 five of the 25 stores were managed by Portland businessmen, including Freeman's jewelry store. *Even through the Fifties, there were no Jews in the hotel, hardware, or pharmacy business; nor in the police, fire, city departments or banking; very few individuals worked in offices at the Bath Iron Works (BIW). Jews were also under-represented in local service clubs.*

In perspective the BIW, the town's biggest employer, had become a major shipbuilder during the Russo-Japanese War ('04-'05), a war which fueled my grandfather Nathan Petlock's junk business so he could bring over his family of five from Lithuania in 1907. Typically the elder Petlock signed the 1922 *shul* charter with an x—it's displayed on Beth Israel's website-- and his son Morris who had attended Hebron Academy, 1916-18,

signed for both of them. While most of the immigrants and their kids were lucky to finish even 8th grade prior to 1920, “Meshe” Petlock, had made it into a Yankee prep school.

The culture was centered in the home, the High Holy Days were revered, and rabbis generally sparse. In the Twenties through the Forties—and I speak from history gained from three siblings born 1918-1923, cultural practices like keeping four sets of dishes, auctioning *aliyahs*, going to the movies after Yom Kippur, taking pride in Hank Greenberg, participating in musical shows at shul, and attending every one else’s child’s Boston Jewish wedding. However, by the Thirties the 2nd generation boys had adapted to football and baseball; Jewish kids were in no way segregated. Morse High School yearbooks provide a wealth of notes on their secular activities. Also, ex-Bathites would attend shul during High Holy Day services, including the renowned sports writer Shirley Povich—father of Maury—who returned annually after leaving in 1921.

One index of this small community’s vitality was the friendship among four immigrant leaders 1920-1945: Morris Povich, and his nephew Max Kutz--each had opened clothing stores during WWI; Sam Levin (arrived c. 1910) and Morris Cohen (arrived 1914), the hazan and grocery/meat store owner who voluntarily served as the shul’s spiritual guide and Bar Mitzvah coach before his death in 1946. They played important religious and financial roles in the formation and development of the shul (1922), replacing such elders as Harry Brown, the elder Gediman, Isaac Mikelsky, and Nathan Povich. That the four played pinochle regularly for thirty years while their wives played bridge is another index of Bath’s Jewish fraternity. Typically they had children graduating Morse High in droves

between 1935-1945. Yet, while these immigrants shared a common Eastern European heritage, they were not homogeneous, neither in education, business acumen, association, nor “style.” But they all paid shul dues, spoke Yiddish, and sent their children to college.

Three themes that brand this community were: keeping kosher, not inter-marrying, and fighting anti-Semitism. Most families did not eat out. From *taglach* to chicken, it was decidedly a Jewish cuisine. The men in the extended family of Cohen, Cogan, and Petlock—each with separate grocery and meat stores 1914 through 1960—had made pastrami for Sam’s, the renowned eatery and lobster place in the South end. Bath’s landtsmen went to Jewish Portland to buy rye bread or to get corn beef on *bulkes*; kosher meat was brought in by bus from both Portland and Lewiston. Most extended discounts as a courtesy to their fellow Jews. And all buried their dead at Mount Sinai in Deering since Bath did not allow a Jewish cemetery until 2007.

“Marrying Jewish” was a dominant and understood communal value. The conservative Jewish tradition of marrying in the faith had by the Sixties become the central tension between generations. Intermarriage and dating out were taboo. *Yet, paradoxically, interfaith marriage and dating had always affected most of the 20 or so families who had been active in Bath up through the mid-Fifties, including my frum family which was silent about the Litvak uncle in Oregon who had intermarried back in 1922.*

Post WWII, the City generally accepted diversity with its Irish, French, Italian, Greek, Armenian, and Jewish “outsiders.” Once established as “good” citizens the 100 Jewish

residents attempted consciously to maintain a balance between Old World values and demands imposed by life in America. By the Fifties anti-Semitism had become less intimidating, though an 8% Jewish quota at private colleges like Bowdoin and medical and law schools prevailed. My sister Ruth nineteen years my senior, a 1935 Morse High grad and a 1939 Simmons College graduate, “hated” Bath because of its anti-Semitism.

In Bath Jews managed to be civil, civic-minded, and charitable in their community involvements, and quiet in their community relations. As ad manager for the high school paper in 1953, I easily got ads from Jewish shopkeepers because they supported such civic activities. Surely two or three poor, under-class kids, called me dirty Jew. I could take that; in 1954 I could also walk away from the print shop owner who said directly they didn’t hire Jews. [Not something I could easily repeat to my Mother.]

Dr. Joe Smith’s story truly typifies the pre-WWII social reality of Jewish life. When in 1941, Dr. Joe, born in Latvia, Bowdoin grad and medical doctor from Brunswick, built his Spanish style bungalow on Washington Street among WASP Colonial era houses, it signaled among his landtsmen that Joe--who could not even practice medicine at the Bath hospital until 1937 --had gotten his revenge on the town fathers.

Time the great healer mitigated anti-Semitism in Bath. Foremost, the WWII service plaque at Beth Israel signaled significant Jewish patriotism. Bob Levine, brother-in-law of Dr. Jacob Smith, had lost his leg in the war. Sam Povich of lobster fame would proudly display his WWI sailor tattoo. Yet, Arthur Gediman, a vociferous defender of

Jewish athletes, constantly decried the BIW's anti-Jewish hiring practices. By the 1950's, however, successful civic involvement ensured a permanent home for the Jews, despite the exodus of half of the second generation.

Re the exodus of my generation, there are three factors: (1) lack of economic opportunity, (2) higher education and professional opportunities elsewhere, and (3) most Bath Jewish women married Jewish men outside of Bath. *The exodus within my own extended family counted 22 individuals from two generations who left between 1940 and 1955; that's a 22% exodus rate based on a population of 100.* The exodus was inevitable considering opportunity elsewhere, many leaving between 1940-1955 to five major areas: Portland, Boston, New York City, Washington, D.C., and, Portland, Oregon.

Still the remaining or renewal crowd ran "family" stores into the 90's; others started new businesses; two were doctors. Six "stores" with prominent signage --Povich's, Praver's, Gediman's, Kutz's, Mikels, and Greenblatt's --all echoed original immigrant names into the 21st Century. Typically the Praver daughter left but her two brothers expanded their father's successful wholesale produce company, though later moving to Portland. The 2nd generation who stayed—many WWII vets and mostly men-- would remain into the 1970's and even later as professionals or businessmen. They also co-existed with about twelve empty nester immigrant couples who remained for three more decades in Bath.

In contrast, **the exodus** from 1930-1960 was more pronounced when entire families left. Six of the eight Nathan Povich children--who had moved from Bar Harbor to Bath in 1917-- moved in the 1930's. Eight Cohens between 1935-1956, eight Cogans and three Ariks in 1948, three Ziblatts by 1963; etc. *Yet, significantly, children of thirteen families*

remained essentially intact 1950-1980 along with the Browns who had no children and the dozen or so who comprised the empty nester group.

Uniquely Don Povich (1927-2001), an iconic and popular figure in the generation that stayed, ran Povich's Men Shop for four decades; today a Patten Library room is named in his memory. His own two children would leave in the 70's. His D.C. lawyer brother Albert (died in 2011) had left in 1943 for the Navy. Interestingly the Povich "clan" has resided for 80 years in D.C., keeping a summer place in Cundy's Harbor, **and** a house on Front Street locked up which Nathan Povich (died 1930) once owned.

By the 1950's Morris Povich had become a bank trustee; Jay Povich his brother-in-law claimed to be the first Jew in the Bath Country Club. The lawyer Harold Rubin, born in Boston to immigrants and a late arrival to Bath in 1939, had become a judge, but by the 1960's his two children had moved on to Portland and Pennsylvania.

Starting in the early 1970's, however, Bath and Beth Israel Congregation began to experience the arrival of new, younger "in-migrant" families from the Eastern seaboard, a phenomenon that has slowly led to the now 85 families who comprise Bath's Beth Israel community. Of the original pre-1940 immigrant families, only two individuals remain if *we exclude Ms. Sophie Singer, age 93, of Brunswick.

In summary, Bath's Jews hold a genuine place in 20th century Maine history in terms of the once thriving Old World community of 20 families, 1900-1960. The "founders" can be credited with building the 1922 shul. Equally important, the 2nd generation happily flourished 1950-1990 without the schmooze and tone of their earlier Yiddish forebearers.

While most of Bath's second and third generations ultimately became part of the exodus from Bath across America, the special September 2009 reunion witnessed the remarkable return of twenty representatives from 13 original pre-1940 families. One, Sarah Silverman Smyth, had proudly descended from her grandfather Isaac Mikelski the original 1886 settler. It's also interesting to note that her highly successful first cousin Robert Smith, raised in Boston, gave the Bath shul the plaque commemorating the Mikelski's while, according to Cantor Daniel Leeman of Beth Israel, also gifting Bowdoin College with an entire building.

Credits: David Ziblatt in California who helpfully reminds us that many families and individuals beyond the twenty original families listed in my 2009 "Memoir" used Bath *as a stopover point in their journey in America*, especially between 1920-1950. Andrew Smith, grandson of the late Dr. Joe and a Morse High graduate, for reading an early draft of this paper. And Professor Freidenreich for getting me to expand the "Memoir of Bath's Jews" by focusing on the Bath community led by the late Don Povich (1927-2001).

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