

III. The Alperets and the Cohens

The first official record of Nathan Cohen's residence in Maine is the petition for naturalization filed January 25, 1889 in the Penobscot County Superior Court in Bangor. This states that

I, Nathan Cohen of Bangor, a native of Russia, a free white person, of the age of 45 years, and now or lately owing his allegiance to His Majesty, the Emperor of Russia, do hereby declare, that it is my intention, bona fide, to become a citizen of the United States and to renounce forever all allegiance and fidelity to any Foreign Prince, Potentate, State or Sovereignty whatever, and particularly to renounce forever, all allegiance and fidelity to His Majesty, the Emperor of Russia.

This declaration was witnessed by F.A. Adams, sworn to by the "Clerk of all the Judicial Courts for said County," Charles F. Sweet, and signed with an "x" (his mark) by Nathan who could not yet write in English. Not long after the required two years had passed from the petition date, Nathan returned to the court to secure his American citizenship:

"To the Honorable Justices of the Supreme Judicial Court, holden at Bangor, within and for said County, on the first Tuesday of April, 1891.

Nathan Cohen of the age 47 years now resident in Bangor respectfully represents: That he was born in Russia, that he has resided within the limits of the United States of America ever since the year 1882 during which time he has behaved as a man of good moral character, that he is firmly attached to the principles of the Constitution of the United States, and well disposed to the good order and happiness of the same; that he, more than two years ago, made a declaration on Oath of his intention to become a citizen of the United States in the Clerk's Office of said Court on the 25th day of January A.D. 1889 which declaration is recorded in Volume 4 page 100 of the Records of Declarations of Foreigners - to which declaration and the record of the same reference is had; that he has not borne any hereditary title, nor been of any of the orders of nobility, and that he is now ready, absolutely and entirely, to renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to every foreign Prince, Potentate, State or Sovereignty whatever, and more particularly to the Czar of Russia whose subject he is, or lately was, and to take the Oath required by law, to enable him to become a citizen of the United States of America, and to be entitled to all the rights and privileges thereby acquired.

Once again, F.A. Adams was the witness and Nathan provided his mark. The oath, sworn April 23, 1891, was signed in Russian.

The nearly one hundred years that have passed since that time have obscured most of the details of Nathan's life. He settled immediately in Bangor, although his name did not appear in a city directory until 1892 when he was recorded as residing at 157 Essex Street. (Because Nathan was one of the fif-

teen founders of the Beth Israel Society in 1888, which was the predecessor to the Congregation Beth Israel, it is apparent that he was active in the community, despite not being listed in the city directory. His eldest son, Max, was elected the synagogue's first president.) The Essex Street home was occupied by Nathan's son, Simon, and his family, according to the directory from the previous year; however, the group may have resided there from the time that Nathan's wife and children joined him, which census records indicate as having occurred in 1884. Nathan's eldest child, Sarah, who was newly married to Hyman Epstein, joined the family in 1884 having made the crossing with her brother-in-law, Harry. Hyman remained in Europe for a brief time, whereas there is some indication that due to his eligibility for conscription, Max probably accompanied his father.

As Nathan's citizenship petition confirms, the first hurdle the Cohens had to overcome was the language barrier, which was especially difficult in Maine. Limited resources forced them to seek immediate income but, as one historian has noted, "the language problem meant that the newly arrived immigrant...could not travel through the city, could not secure a place to live by himself, and could not look for a job outside his immediate circle of immigrant friends." At the time of their arrival immigrants "were forced to rely on their own ingenuity and on a fragile network of relatives and friends who had faced and solved similar problems..."¹ The benefit of having relatives in Bangor made life somewhat easier for Nathan's brother, nieces and nephews as they arrived over the next twenty-five years; however, at the time of Nathan's settlement in the city the handful of his brethren situated there were not in a position to offer much help to newcomers from Russia. The few Jewish families in Bangor at that time were of German origin and spoke only English or their native tongue; the Yiddish spoken by Litvaks such as Nathan was as much a foreign language to them as English was to Nathan.

The language problem, combined with the hiring practices of the lumber companies, forced the family to pursue what work they could; the early records show that Nathan and his sons originally worked as peddlers. Although Bangor was a thriving retail center at the time, scores of small communities and farms in the surrounding countryside relied on the men who called periodically with their wagons packed with goods. Using their homes as a base of operation, peddlers would make the rounds in the rural districts, staying with farming families during the week. Nathan purchased a horse and a wagon and traveled around to farms selling shoelaces, lotions and similar goods, whereas his son, Simon, began his business career by selling matches one box at a time on the highway between Bangor and Bucksport. SAD's account of her father's early years as a peddler in Bangor (Israel Alpert, circa 1910) describes a routine that probably hadn't changed much from his uncle Nathan's thirty years before:

My father had a team and a horse and he went to homes and commercial areas where he bought up scrap metals which he in turn sold to junk yards. Papa got up very early in the morning. In the winter he had to stoke the furnace, add enough coal to last all day, and build up a good fire in the stove. He also shoveled snow and took care of the



Nathan Cohen: 1844-1901. *Right:* Nathan and Rosa outside of the Essex Street house, late 1890's. (Courtesy of Pauline Cohen).

horse before hitching him to the team, and made sure his family was set for the day before leaving for outlying areas to buy and sell as he went along. In the winter he left before dawn and returned after dark. He was a small slim man, barely five feet tall, and how he handled all those heavy metal parts by himself, I'll never understand. The side of the wagon used by my father in his business had the name of its former owner, "Bunker," on it. Not knowing his real name, everyone who did business with him called him Billy or Eddie Bunker. He was simple, straight-forward and honest with the people he dealt with, and he was highly respected.

When Samuel M. Cohen arrived in New York June 5, 1892, he proceeded directly to Bangor where he joined his brother's family at 157 Essex Street. He also worked as a peddler, leaving home for four or five days at a time selling used clothing in the countryside. Four years later Nathan's family, which now included Bangor-born Louis (b.1886), moved to a duplex at 305 Essex and Samuel M. established separate quarters at 140 Hancock Street to accommodate his wife and son who had arrived from Russia. When the flat next door to Nathan and Rosa at 303 Essex became available (circa 1899) Samuel and Dora moved in. A year or two later Samuel and Dora relocated once again, this time to 13 Essex where they stayed until they were able to save enough to purchase a house at 230 York Street.

Over the years the Nathan Cohen family's living arrangements reflected a communal character, as the house at 303-305 Essex was occupied by a variety of Cohen children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. Hyman and Sarah Epstein continued to live with Nathan, Rosa and their other children in No. 305, whereas Harry Epstein moved into No. 303 after Samuel moved his family down the street to 13 Essex. A few years later Hyman and Sarah shared No. 303 with Harry, until Sarah's brothers Samuel N. and Louis took this flat over. (The Essex Street duplex was the first of three clusters of houses occupied by Alpert-Cohen relatives. The second was East Summer Street where Max, Jacob and Samuel Cohen, Jr. lived at Nos. 43, 50 and 22, respectively. When S.H. Cohen built a house on Garland Street near the corner of French, and then moved his daughter and son-in-law next door, he established a third Alpert-Cohen enclave. First, his brother Robert settled with his wife, Fannie, around the corner on 311 French Street; then, in the 1940's two of Israel Alpert's sons joined the French-Garland Street corner: Maurice lived at 302 French and Isadore lived at No. 266. Next, Isidor Alpert's son, Sidney, moved his wife and baby into 280 French Street - a move into the Alpert-Cohen neighborhood that was purely coincidental: they were escaping 110 Essex where Dr. Kaskin's Veterinary Hospital was located in the basement. The final addition to the French Street group occurred when Robert and Fannie Cohen's son, George, bought a house on the corner of French and Garland Streets.)

For reasons long forgotten, Nathan and Rosa's eldest sons established their bases of operations in the small towns of Sangerville (pop. 1204), and Brownville (pop. 1074) about forty miles northeast of Bangor. By 1891 Max had