

Appendix 2

The Alperowitzes,
the Fines
and the Costrells

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The custom may seem alien to us today, but interfamily marriage was widespread among Russians, most of whom lived in hamlets from fifty to three hundred people in size. Because the residents tended to spend their entire (usually brief) lives in the same place, and the number of available mates was a factor of the village size and location (only one village in a hundred had more than two thousand residents), marriages among close relatives were commonplace. This practice, which was not limited to Russians (a study conducted in 1875 among English Jews showed that 7.5 percent of the marriages were between first cousins), continued through the early part of the century in America. From 1900 through 1915 the Alpert-Cohen clan engaged in a series of six inter-family marriages including four pairings of first cousins and two pairings of second cousins, though not all the prospective mates came from the same village or even knew each other. While there is no evidence to suggest that any but three of the seven Alperowitzes of Sosenka married relatives, undoubtedly there were many such relationships among earlier European generations.

Among the Alpert ancestors who intermarried, the uncle-niece relationship between Maishe Alperowitz and Merke Alperowitz remains the most perplexing. Nearly all of Merke and Maishe's present day descendants had never heard of this arrangement from their parents; most had understood that Maishe and Merke were cousins. There were, however, two exceptions. According to SAD, her "paternal grandmother [Merke] was the niece by marriage of her husband Maishe" (the reference "by marriage" was added in pencil by SAD to her typewritten manuscript, perhaps as an afterthought). The other reference to the uncle-niece marriage came from KAG. When summarizing the early years of Isidor Alpert's life, she stated that his "Grandfather Reuben Alperowitz, was a timber man and his father also; son of Masov and Merke Alperowitz." Later in KAG's notes, Merke is described as "a very tiny woman, an orphan who married her uncle, used as a household servant by the family she grew up in..."

KAG and SAD's material presented two distinct problems, the first of which concerned Merke's ancestry. With KAG's mention that Merke was an orphan who had married her uncle it was naturally assumed that her husband, Maishe, was a son of Reuben and Soshe Esther. Information supplied by Bertha Rubin clarified this. Bertha's mother-in-law, Leah Alperowitz Rubin, was Reuben and Soshe Esther's youngest child, born 1867 in Sosenka. Bertha absorbed over twenty years of family history from Leah; part of those years were spent together in the same building in Brooklyn when Leah lived upstairs from her son's family. (Bertha was three months short of ninety at the

time of our conversations, but she demonstrated an astonishing ability to recall events that had taken place over fifty years ago.) According to Bertha, Leah had three sisters and three brothers including "Sarah, Chivia, Merke, Noshke [Nathan], Yankel and Simcha." As for Maishe, she had never heard the name and insisted that Leah had never mentioned any other siblings. In later conversations she reiterated that she was quite positive that Leah did not have a brother named Maishe. (After a review of Bertha's evidence KAG concluded that the perception of Merke as a servant [and, hence a ward] in Reuben's house probably derived from her role as the eldest daughter and overseer of the household.)

Once it was confirmed that Merke was a daughter of Reuben and Soshe Esther, the question of her marriage to Maishe remained. Who was he and where did he come from? If he was her uncle by blood, he would have been a brother of Reuben or Soshe Esther. Otherwise, if SAD was correct in her note that Maishe was an uncle by marriage, he would have been the husband of a sister to Reuben or Soshe Esther who had died, and Merke would have been his second wife.¹ However, the only clues to his origins suggest that Maishe, Reuben and Chivia Alperowitz Fine (the mother of sisters Bessie and Mary Fine, who married brothers Israel and Isidor Alpert) were siblings. Reuben and Maishe were kohanim; Chivia was the daughter of a kohen; and each was an Alperowitz. The first cousin relationship between Maishe's and Chivia's children also supports this conclusion.

Bessie and Mary Fine were among the eleven children of Shimon Fine and Chivia Alperowitz. SAD mentioned that "while there was much intermarriage in the Alperowitz clan, Shimon Fine, my maternal grandfather was an outsider. The Fines were dark eyed with dark hair and quick tempered, while the Alperowitzes were light complexioned, blue eyed, kindly and even tempered."

The Fines lived on a farm in the Minsk gubernia that had been rented from the local graf by Shimon's family for nearly a hundred years. The family's early years were prosperous, nevertheless, the environment was one of fear and superstition, always perched on the precipice of conflict. According to SAD, when Chivia hired a peasant girl to work in the house, "the girl came although she was terrified of them. Later she told Basha [Bessie] that she did not close her eyes all that night, so sure was she that she would be murdered and her blood drawn out by these strange and terrible people." Mary, according to KAG, remembered her mother (Chivia) idyllically, "spinning and loom-

1. Uncle-niece marriages are permitted under Jewish law which states "It is a meritorious act for one to marry the daughter of one's sister or one's brother, but one should not marry without consulting an authority, any other relative, whether she is related to himself or to his deceased or divorced wife..." (*Code of Jewish Law*, Vol. 4, p. 7). There is also a basis for this practice in ancient kohanic custom. When the Roman destruction of the Second Temple (circa 70 C.E.) marked the end of the official functions of the kohanim, the priestly pedigrees were lost and were replaced by family tradition. The result, as one historian has noted, was that the kohanim "cherished their purity of descent even more, for it was the last vestige of their exalted status. In Israel and Babylonia their preoccupation with genealogical purity continued into the sixth century to such a degree that a kohen who wished to ensure the continued purity of his family would marry only his sister's daughter." (*Finding Our Fathers*, p.61).

ing the flax" and in the next breath recalling "how she ran into the wheat to hide, to escape from the dogs set on her by the anti-Semitic shepherds..." The Fines left the farm (according to SAD the graf sold the land and they were forced out; according to KAG, Shimon's oldest sons persuaded him to sell) and moved to Borisov where Shimon "went into the grain business and lost everything through the market going up and down..." KAG also recalled that other ventures were attempted, but

everywhere he went, he would start something and then be discovered and driven out. How scared Mary was, with Cossack officers appearing, six feet tall and a tall astrakhan hat on top of that announcing - "You've got twenty-four hours to get out of here!"

A small store was opened, which Chivia ran while, according to SAD, Shimon "buried himself ever more deeply in his studies of the Talmud..."

Whether from hard work, the bearing and rearing of eleven children, or from genetic malfunction or all of these factors, Chivia contracted Bright's Disease, a kidney disorder, and died when Basha was sixteen years old.

This left Bessie to raise the younger children, but Shimon remarried within a year and the children all left home (or were driven out). According to SAD, "Basha, Mary, Laza, Myer and Sam took rooms together and Basha kept house while the others went out to work or to religious schools." They were miserably poor. Myer, who was engaged in religious studies, took his meals at the homes of relatives, which was a common practice of the time. SAD described her uncle Myer's downfall and the effect it had on Bessie:

He became interested in scientific subjects and secretly read such books on his off hours when he was not immersed in his religious studies. One day an aunt, who was fanatically religious, caught him with one of these secular books which were considered "tref" or non-kosher. She ran around to the various families who fed him and told them to give him no food until he came to his senses. He must have been somewhat malnourished because he became ill with pneumonia and died. This loss had a profound effect on Basha. From then on she no longer believed in the methodology of religion but in its ethical messages. She adopted a conservative attitude, teaching me to believe that radicalism too far to the "right" or to the "left" was bad.

Still, KAG described her aunt Bessie as "always a staunch pro-Bolshevik in arguments that would wax fierce when families got together." And SAD recalled that

it was sometime during this period [of Myer's death] that Basha moved to Minsk. Mary, who was very attached to her followed in her wake, but what they did for a living I do not know. She did tell me of going into the woods late at night to meet secretly with other young dissidents to talk against the Czar and the fearful conditions under which

they lived. These meetings were very dangerous and if caught all these young people could have been killed.

Bessie and Mary's youngest sister, Rachel-Leah, who according to KAG was a "revolutionary," was "shot at by Czarist troops when she was 14 or 16 while making a speech." Prior to moving to Minsk, Mary

at the age of eight, worked in the match factory in Borisov... She later went to Tula to live with her uncle (Peperinov) who was well off and had a samovar factory. There she lived in an atmosphere of culture - all of them could speak French, play the piano, etc., and there was a tutor in the house. They were warned by their porter when officers came to make a search - the porter, a Prussian, also protected them as "my Jews" (cf. South, in an inverse way) during the period that seems to be the 1905 revolution. Mother was registered as a seamstress, though what she did was mostly assist in the running of the household. She remembers how in the 1905 revolution the Czar decreed freedom of speech and assembly in order to stop the thing and the students held a tremendous demonstration in the square and they were shot down in cold blood. Blood covered the streets. She used to take the tram on Sundays and go out in the country to Yasnaya Polyana and watch and listen to the conversation of the students who gathered at the gate to talk with the Graf Tolstoy - with a long white beard over his peasant smock - who never got along with his wife who was too "high-toned" and ambitious for court life. His children, it was said, covered the countryside. An appleblossomy scene.

After saving four hundred rubles Mary followed Bessie to America.

Sosenka's tiny size and ethnic mixture would appear to make it likely that other Alperowitzes born or residing there from the 1840's to the 1890's were related to Reuben and Maishe especially if they were descendants of kohanim. (The earliest census figures available date from 1865, when the village recorded a population of eighty-five; twenty years earlier Sosenka was probably even smaller.) A year after Nathan's birth, Deborah Alperowitz was born in Sosenka (1845) as was a brother Eliyahu and a sister (name and dates unknown). Deborah married Yehoshua Kastrel of nearby Kurenets around 1867 and the couple resided there until 1887 when they moved to Libau. The marriage produced five children including Fruma, Mussia, Yehuda-Leib, Mendel and Eiser. As to Deborah's family background, Yehuda-Leib's son Joshua noted in a letter, "I know that my grandmother Deborah had more brothers and sisters who lived in their childhood in several 'shtetlach' [such as] Sosenka, Dolhinow, Kurenets etc. One of her sisters married Salmon Bitchkovsky in Smorgon, where she lived for many years. Moshe Alperowitz, who lived in Tallin from 1921 until the Holocaust was born about 1880 in Sosenka. His father was a brother of my grandmother and his name was Eliyahu Alperowitz."² (Yankev

2. Letter from Joshua Kastrel to the author.

Alperowitz's second son also bore the name Eliohu.) In correspondence with Robert Costrell, Joshua observed "As to your question whether we are Cohanim - I know only that my father was neither Cohen nor Levite, but my grandmother Deborah, born Alperowitz was of a Cohanim family; her nephew - Moshe Alperowitz...visited us in Libau several times and was proud of being a Cohen."³

Were Deborah, Eliyahu and their sister siblings of Reuben or Maishe Alperowitz? Joshua wrote me, "There are no doubts that we are from the same origin, but after more than a hundred years (five generations) it is very difficult to find out the connection."

The origins of the Alpert-Costrell relationship are equally obscure. Two children of Nachum Costrell and his wife, Rochelaya Alperowitz, married grandchildren of Reuben and Soshe Esther: Sadie to Edward Alpert in 1905 and Solomon to Annie Cohen in 1911. Edward Alpert's parents were Aaron Alperowitz and Sarah Alperowitz; Annie Cohen's parents were Yankev and Itka Alperowitz. According to their children, Edward Alpert and Sadie Costrell were first cousins, and Solomon Costrell and Annie Cohen were second cousins. If Aaron Alperowitz and Rochelaya Alperowitz were brother and sister, this would account for the first cousin relationship between their children. The second cousin relationship between Solomon Costrell and Annie Cohen is more complex because there are a number of combinations that would result in first cousinhood between their respective parents.

An overview of the Costrell family prepared by Louis Costrell includes the statement that Annie's grandfather, Reuben Alperowitz, and Solomon Costrell's grandfather were brothers. The first page of this summary outlines Solomon Costrell's family and includes the notation "Grandfather of Solomon N. Costrell (He was a Kostrell) was a brother of Reuben Alperowitz, Grandfather of Grandma Annie Costrell." On the second page, which outlines Annie Cohen Costrell's family, essentially the same note appears: "Grandfather of Grandpa Solomon N. Costrell was a brother of Reuben Alperowitz. He was a Kostrell."⁴

While other evidence rules out the possibility that Reuben and the paternal grandfather of Solomon Costrell were brothers (the religious descent of the families alone precludes this: the Costrells are Israelites whereas Reuben was a kohen), it is possible that Solomon's maternal grandfather, who was an Alperowitz, may have been Reuben's brother. Conversely, the commonalty of the Alperowitz name is not necessarily meaningful considering the circumstances under which names were changed or assigned in those times.

Another reference to Solomon Costrell's ancestry came from Yankev Alperowitz. He wrote to his children in Bangor of his daughter Annie's fiance, that "The groom's grandfather, Joseph Nateh, is a man I knew, a respected person in the world. He maintained quite a bit of property." There is no mention of a family relationship between the Alperowitzes and the Costrells.

An account of the Costrell background is provided through a series of letters written by the late Joshua Kastrel of Tel Aviv to various relatives in America. Although he had no written evidence to provide dealing with the

3. Letter from Joshua Kastrel to Robert Costrell June 25, 1988.

4. An Outline of the Costrell Family by Louis Costrell.

origin of his family, Joshua wrote, "...I remember some facts - very important for your research. I remember that one of my uncles (killed by the Nazis in the holocaust in 1941-1944) had kept a very antique book - I think it was Rashi's interpretation of the Bible, but I am not sure. On the front page of this book the following sentences in Spanish had been written:

I am Miguel Castro; after the French Revolution I escaped from Spain, where my parents and parents of my parents lived for many hundred years. They were Jews but could not serve our God openly and were registered as Catholics. In the underground they guarded the Jewish holidays and prayed to our God. Now I am with my family in Southern France and we are free people. I beg my descendants to add on this page their names and to notice the places of their staying.

"I can't remember the names of all Miguel's descendants who made notices on the pages of the antique book, but I do remember that his son named Yehuda lived in Prague and after that moved to the Vilna district. I don't remember other details of his notice, but I do remember his notice that he came to the Vilna district after the Napoleon War. I suppose that it was in or about 1820. I am not sure, but I think that the name of the father of my grandfather was Samuel Kastroll and he had ten brothers and sisters, but I don't remember their names... My grandfather had some brothers who changed their family names (for the reason not to serve the Tsar 12 years) to Gurevitsch and Alperovitz..."⁵

"The book with the inscription of Miguel Castro was kept by my grandmother Debora, the widow of Yehoshua, born in Kurenets [Joshua changed this to Sosenka in a subsequent letter] as Alperovitz. She allowed [me] to see the book only in her presence and I saw it twice."⁶

"As to the changes in our family name the following facts are known to me - when the first Castro settled in [the] Vilna district the local authorities added to his name the letter 'L' and changed the letter 'C' to 'K' because the pronunciation of the letter 'C' in Russian is 'ts' and so the name became Kastroll or Kastrol. One of my uncles who lived in London for many years spelled his name with a 'C' - Castrell. My grandfather Yehoshua changed his family name to Kastrell with an 'e' instead of an 'o'. I don't know why he did it, but I suppose that the reason was to avoid 12 years service in the army of the Tsar of Russia."⁷

5. Letter from Joshua Kastrel to Michael Castroll December 11, 1983.

6. Letter from Joshua Kastrel to Robert Costrell May 27, 1987.

7. Letter from Joshua Kastrel to Robert Costrell June 25, 1988.