

Lee Merson

Lee, Chaim's wife, remembered that her father escaped from the Russian Army during the Russo-Japanese War by coming to his brothers who were then in Auburn. One moved on to St. Paul, Minnesota, but her father was content to remain in Auburn with his chum, Max Supovitz, from yeshiva (Hebrew School) days. They reminisced about Russia frequently. Pogroms had skipped Tavayan, near Vilna, but they could remember the terror of police kidnapping children for the army. He was strictly Orthodox. He peddled all week but quit work on Friday at noon so that he could observe the Sabbath. He saved every penny he could to send for his wife and four children. The oldest was seven, the youngest one-and-a-half, and the mother made them hold hands all the way to America. The steerage tickets on the *Lusitania* were purchased on the installment plan, and food was cottage cheese dried in the shape of balls known as *gumilke*.

When they arrived in Auburn, Lee's uncle and aunt renamed the children to make them more American; Israel was the only one who kept his Hebrew name. Lena hated her name, but May and Nathan accepted theirs immediately. The children knew only Yiddish, but Israel, age seven, and May, age five, were put right into school and succeeded in learning English the first year. The two younger children spoke Yiddish until they went to school too. Nathan went to Boston University at age fifteen and graduated at nineteen. Milton, who was born in Auburn, went to

Bates College. He was an athlete, and when his older sisters bought a piano, he became a musician. He later taught French and German at Bates.

Lee (Lena) remembered the turmoil in the house when Israel signed up for the navy at age seventeen, as a telegrapher. The family mourned as if he were dead. When his father applied for citizenship, he said he had only four children. He did not count the one in the service. Israel sailed to France and was discharged when he was discovered to be underage.

Both Lee and Nathan earned money by stitching in a shoe factory every summer. They were supposed to be at least fifteen, but both worked before that age. Lee still felt wretched recalling the smell of the leather at seven o'clock each morning.

Milton, who delighted his father by playing "The Flight of the Bumble Bee," taught in a private school in New York to support himself through the Ph.D. program at Columbia. Though he personally suffered no animus, he resented the anti-Semitism practiced there. He enlisted in the U.S. Army and graduated from Officer Candidate School as an artillery lieutenant. In a February mopping-up operation in the Battle of the Bulge, Milton was killed. He is buried in the American Cemetery in France because the family wished to spare the mother the anguish of a funeral here. His widow remarried and sent his son through Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as Milton would have wished.

Lee's son, David, and his cousin owned and operated the women's wear store started by her brothers, Nathan and Israel. It took three apartments to celebrate David's bar mitzvah. The whole town was invited.

Many families started by collecting junk and progressed to second-hand furniture. One man would bring his own family and then bring others. Lee never felt poor. She always had a nickel for movies and a penny for ice cream. There were comparatively rich families living in Lewiston. Six or eight families owned dress stores, men's clothing shops, or furniture stores. Some made money by putting a down payment on real estate to sell the property for a profit, without really owning it.

Lee was a substitute teacher in the elementary school and remembered the dietitian who came from Virginia. She was fired when she let it be known she was a Jew, but later there were Jewish teachers, like Sara Meltzer Smalley. Now, however, there are no Jews teaching in Auburn schools.