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What is it like to be a Jew in Maine?

by Debbie Rittner

What is it like to be a Jew in Maine? I wanted to know. Don't ask me why! Every time my car crosses the Piscataqua River and I see the sign: ENTERING MAINE I can hardly keep my car on the road. What is it like to be a Jew in Maine? I had to know, so I started driving north and began with the past. What was it like to be a Jew in Maine, two, three generations ago?

Charlotte and Julius, who likes to be called Zeese, raise three children in Augusta. Charlotte grew up in Skowhegan, Zeese in Bangor, 50 miles away. When Charlotte's grandmother lived in Skowhegan, there were only 7 Jewish families and no shul. But her grandmother kept kosher. That was her own way of being religious. And Charlotte's grandfather went by horse and buggy to Waterville, ten, fifteen miles away where there was a *shochet* (kosher slaughterer) for meat. And for the High Holy Days, Charlotte's grandmother rented rooms for the whole family in Bangor.

Zeese's father was a cattle dealer. He came to Boston from a farm in Poland in 1918. He was working in Chelsea in textiles. There were cattle around there and he heard cows mooing and he got homesick, so he went up to Bangor where he had a relative, bought a horse and wagon, and went around the country doing cattle dealing. Every year before the High Holy Days, he sent live chickens on the railroad, in crates with food and water, to Brooklyn to the *shochet* for swinging over the head on Rosh Hashanah.

Zeese remembers growing up living within walking distance of the Orthodox synagogue. In those days, there were two synagogues in Bangor, "Orthodox and more Orthodox," and Zeese's family belonged to the "more Orthodox." On Friday nights they would all walk home, eight or nine of them. The stars were out, and it was like being on cloud 9, walking home together for a Shabbos meal.

What was it like to be a Jew in Maine? Sam Slosberg should know. He is 80 year old and lives in Gardiner, just south of Augusta. Sam's father was a peddler, one of the first Jewish settlers in the area. He carried his own hard-boiled egg with him or would ask for one. If people asked why, he told them "stomach trouble," and that's how he kept kosher. People in Maine are wary, I'm told. Sam didn't want to be interviewed.

But I learned that when he was a young attorney in his 20's he decided to run for the State Legislature. He went knocking on doors, introducing himself and asking for votes. He knocked on the door of a woman who was quite elderly. And she looked at him very quizzically and said, "You're not from here." And Sam said, "Yes, I am." And she said, "I don't think you are." And Sam said, "Yes, I am. I was born

He was in Randolph," which is right across the river. And she said, "I know you weren't from here. You're in Gardiner now."



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Gardiner was a center of Jewish life, before Augusta; there were two synagogues there. When Miriam Weiner came to Augusta from Everett, Mass. in 1952, the Augusta synagogue hadn't been built yet. She was looking for an apartment to rent, and one landlady told her, "I know many fine Jewish people... but not in my own home." Miriam Weiner was not discouraged. She found herself a place to live. But when she looked in the phone book for Jewish names like Cohen, there weren't

any. Then one day she was in the supermarket, and she heard a woman with a Yiddish accent, and that's how she joined the sisterhood and discovered all the Jewish organizations.

What was it like to be a Jew in Maine? Bruce Schatz remembers when his grandfather died in Lewiston, 22 years ago. There was no Jewish funeral home in Lewiston. When he was sitting with his grandfather's casket, there was a guy in the next room with an open casket. And in the same funeral home, at his grandfather's funeral, he noticed that instead of a *yahrzeit* candle there was a mass candle with a red beaded cross on it. The funeral home had made a mistake. He turned the glass around so the beaded cross wasn't showing. He asked the rabbi, "How many Jewish funerals are there in this funeral home?" And the rabbi said, "It depends if it's a good year or a bad year." And he told the rabbi, "You don't want to turn the glass around." So the rabbi turned the glass around, and his face turned white. He telephoned the Jewish funeral home in Portland and the Maine State Police, and they could rush a *yahrzeit* candle up to Lewiston.

Bruce had a grandmother with an aunt named Frume who lived in a three-storey tenement building on Newbury Street in Portland, next to the Newbury shul. If you go there now, it's all office buildings, part of the downtown area. Frume's granddaughter married Milton Berle. So she went to the wedding in New York City. Milton Berle introduced her around, and he brought in special pots to cook for the wedding. He offered her *Manischewitz* "on the rocks," and she didn't know what that meant. She had never been out of Portland since she came over from Europe. She said, "Just put it in a glass." After the wedding, Milton Berle supported her, gave her a credit card and sent her an allowance.

Once Milton Berle came to Portland, and Bruce told everyone, "It's my cousin." Bruce was in a restaurant with his grandmother in downtown Portland, and one of Bruce's friends says to Milton Berle, "Is it really true that Bruce Schatz is your cousin?" So his grandmother kicked Milton Berle under the table, and he said, "Yes, yes."