

Preface

It wasn't until I had reached my thirty-fifth year that I became aware that my grandparents didn't always enjoy an idyllic existence in Bangor, Maine. Because Isidor Alpert died three years before I was born and Mary had moved to Connecticut to live with my aunt Katya six years later, when I was about three, my sparse knowledge of them came second hand. Izzy, as my grandfather was called, was described by Katya as mild-natured, with intellectual inclinations, witty, well read and an "excellent logician, who probably would have made a topnotch lawyer..." According to Katya, he had married a firebrand in Mary Fine, who was "...strong-willed, headstrong, with tremendous energy and drive." I knew that they operated a small store on Main Street in Bangor, recalled the prosperous looking home on Leighton Street they occupied in their later years and had heard of the camp at Lucerne where the family used to gather for summer activities, weddings and parties. All of this created the impression that they were typical immigrants who had worked hard and succeeded in the American dream.

Prior to coming to Bangor, Izzy spent two years in New York where he worked in the garment district and went to night school. He also joined the Workmen's Circle and frequented the theater, which accounted, in part, for his passion for politics and music. In fact, he became quite attached to New York and preferred living there to the small town atmosphere of Bangor. But Mary, who he met through his brother Israel, insisted on being close to her sister Bessie (Israel's wife) so there they stayed. The city's most compensatory features, as it turned out, were that relatives lived close by in an area where the terrain and climate most resembled their original home in southeastern Lithuania.

As I later discovered, Izzy's character may have been gentle, but below the surface lay a sharp wit. And this told me much about his sensibilities. For example, one evening two elderly women came into his store and sat down at a table in the back. (Like most small confectionery shops of the time, the Main Street store had a fountain to serve ice cream, sodas, beer and such.) The ladies informed my grandfather that they had just come from a revival meeting at the Bangor auditorium where a popular evangelist by the name of Billy Sunday had spoken. After Izzy served them, one of the ladies said, "Mr. Alpert, you know what Billy Sunday says don't you?" "No, ma'am, I can't say what I do." "Billy Sunday says that all the Jews will go to Hell" to which the unfazed shopkeeper replied, "Well I wouldn't worry about that ma'am, they'll soon make a paradise of it."

Then there was the time that a missionary came into town from New York for the purpose of raising money for a religious school in Jerusalem. This character, who was dressed in the traditional manner of the ultra-orthodox, was making the rounds on foot to all the Jewish-owned businesses in Bangor seeking donations. When he arrived at the Main Street store he found my grandfather at the counter with the checkbook open, paying bills. A long pitch was made for a hefty contribution to which Izzy responded by opening the cash register and handing over a dollar bill. The fund raiser, noting a check

on the desk for one hundred dollars written to the Jewish Hospital in Denver, wanted to know why that institution warranted a contribution a hundred times greater than his school, to which Izzy replied, "There is a difference. They take sick people and make them well. You take well people and make them sick." Undoubtedly he had never forgotten his childhood days in one of the religious schools in the Vilna area, for as Katya noted, his heritage was important to him but he had abandoned the customs and outlook of orthodox belief when he came to America.

My grandmother's ambitious nature compensated for Izzy's more relaxed character. (He worked hard but also used to like to go down to the courthouse in the morning to listen to cases and spend hours discussing politics with his cousin Max Cohen in the back room of Max's Exchange Street shop.) It was Mary who required that the store remain open until midnight (their children nicknamed it "the dungeon"); urged that the Main Street store property be expanded to include a house and some apartments; bought the apartment building on Union Street (to help send the kids to college); and then transported herself and Izzy into genteel semi-retirement on Leighton Street. She had also been obsessed with the idea of the camp at Lucerne which was purchased in the 1930's despite a covenant on the property restricting its sale to Jews. That she fought the homeowner's association, thereby paving the way for the sale of the property to a black family twenty years later, told me a lot about my grandmother. But it was Izzy, the gentle diplomat, who always negotiated these acquisitions, lined up the lawyers, and then convinced the bank to lend the money.

I understood that my grandparents were Russians, but I had never questioned my father about when his parents had come here, exactly where they had come from or even why they had settled in Maine. The identities of my great-grandparents was even more of a mystery. What were their names, where did they live and what kind of work did they do?

The answers to these questions took me into worlds that I scarcely knew existed.