

Book One:

The History of the Alperets and Cohens

Introduction

The history of the Alperets and the Cohens may be divided into two distinct though overlapping periods. The European era spanned more than one hundred and twenty years beginning in the 1820's with Reuben and Soshe Esther Alperowitz of the Vilna gubernia and concluded in 1942 with the deaths of their last known descendants to remain in what had become the Soviet Union. The emigration of their children and grandchildren who first settled in Bangor, Maine in 1882, and who became known as Alperets and Cohens, marked the beginning of the American period.

After piecing together fragmentary evidence accumulated from a wide variety of sources, a portrait emerged of a large family that lived and worked in the forests of Lithuania and first came to Maine six years before my grandfather was born. The portrait, however, was dependent upon the reconstruction of historical events and relationships for which critical data were often limited or missing.

Securing information about the generations born prior to 1900 was especially difficult. Lithuania was governed by Poland until the late 18th century when it was absorbed by Russia, made independent in 1918, returned to Poland in 1920 as a result of the First World War, restored to independence in 1939, annexed by the USSR in 1940, occupied by the Germans in 1942 and then reoccupied by the Soviets in 1945. What few civic records that may have been kept by the provincial governments under which the family resided were probably lost during the First World War and the ensuing period of revolution, civil war and war between Poland and the Bolsheviks. These events caused massive damage to the Lithuanian and Belorussian territories and undoubtedly wreaked complete havoc on the facilities where such records would have been stored. The materials that survived were then subjected to the ravages of the German invasion. As a result, in most cases all that is known about the lives of our oldest ancestors are the few fragments handed down to those who now constitute the family elders, nearly all of whom were born in this country after 1910.

The absence of Russian public records meant that vital statistics including birth, marriage and death dates had to be estimated for nearly all non-immigrant ancestors. Most estimated birth dates were calculated by subtracting twenty years from the birth date of the subject's first born child, if known. For example, the birth date of Yankev Alperowitz is unknown, but his first child, Samuel H., was born in 1873 and as a result, Yankev's birth date has been estimated as 1853. The average marriage age used in this calculation is nineteen and the assumption is that a child was always born within one year of the parents' wedding.

The year of death has also been projected in situations where enough information was available to allow for the formation of a hypothesis. It has been deduced, for example, that Reuben Alperowitz's death occurred in 1890 based on the incidence of grandsons bearing his name. Of Reuben's male grandchildren, none were given his name until the births of Yankev and Itka's

youngest son in 1891 and Samuel M. and Dora's first son in 1892. Both grandsons emigrated to Bangor, where each became known as Robert Cohen. The naming of Nathan and Rosa Cohen's youngest sons, Samuel (b.1883) and Louis (b.1886), as well as Maishe and Merke's youngest sons, Israel (b.1884) and Isidor (b.1886), seemed to eliminate Reuben's death as having occurred until after they were born, as at least one of them would have been named for this grandfather. These methods don't apply equally well to all situations where dates are unknown, but they do produce reasonable date ranges in most instances.

Much of the information compiled about the activities of the earliest family members in America derived from the oral accounts of their children and grandchildren. These were supplemented and verified, when appropriate, by sources such as naturalization petitions, passenger ship arrival records, birth, marriage and death certificates, census records, city and regional directories, newspaper accounts, personal memoirs and letters. These sources, however, presented a variety of problems. The Federal Census, for example, reported the name, age, occupation, nationality and citizenship status of each resident, but this data often reflects the difficult conditions under which it was collected. Census takers had to record facts from wary residents who spoke little or no English; and many of those who could communicate often provided vague or misleading information about birth and immigration dates of household members thinking that the authorities were gathering statistics that could result in the kind of harassment they had left behind in Russia. (The specter of military service and discriminatory taxes was always present in the minds of villagers when the census takers came calling in Russia. Parents often did not register their children and otherwise mentioned as few members of their household as possible.) In other instances only a child was available to supply the requested information and this went into the record books whether it was accurate or not. As a result, numerous immigration and birth dates in these sources conflicted with those found elsewhere.

Naturalization petitions, on the other hand, included facts supplied directly by the applicants under circumstances that called for impeccable accuracy. Unfortunately there was not a land rush attitude among the immigrants to become citizens. A vague mistrust of government that carried over from the old country, as well as the perception that citizenship wasn't necessarily valuable, left many immigrants as resident aliens for their entire lives. (Citizens could vote but benefits such as social security did not appear until the 1930's.) Moreover, the petitions of those who did apply for naturalization did not automatically yield bountiful information. Each state generated their own forms and usually required very little personal history from the applicant; it was only after the turn of the century that the federal government issued a standardized form that requested detailed background information from each applicant.

The problem of identifying and then following the movements of family members was exacerbated by the number of names affixed to the same person. The casual way in which names were changed in 19th century Russia, the re-naming of the immigrants when they were processed as aliens, the variety of personal names, some Yiddish and others Hebrew, made the task of tracing individuals through avenues outside of the documents available in Bangor it-

self almost impossible. (The practice of maintaining two names, one for civic use and the other, a sacred name for use in the synagogue and in all Hebrew documents, dates back hundreds of years.) When relatives with identical names were discovered in the same town, or if an individual simply disliked the name that was first selected or had been assigned, yet another change would be initiated. For example, despite the fact that Samuel M. Cohen's 1893 citizenship petition recorded this name, he was listed in city directories of the time as Simon Cohen and then, including the 1900 census, as Simon M. Cohen. He was finally listed as Samuel M. Cohen, but no one knows what the "M" signifies except that it was probably added to set himself apart from nephews Samuel H. and Samuel N. Cohen. Simon Cohen's eldest son, Samuel (b.1892), finally added a "Jr." to his name to distinguish himself from his cousins and uncle. (Both Samuel M. and Samuel H. bore the Hebrew name Simcha, which means "joy." Samuel M. was affectionately known by his great-nieces and nephews in Bangor as the "Fette Shimsel," whereas Samuel H. was known to his contemporaries strictly as "Sam." Because the personal names used in Europe and carried over to this country were often just a contraction of their sacred names, it was common that the same name was used by different people though their original names were different. Simon Alpert, whose Hebrew name was Shimson, not Simcha, was, like his uncle, called "Shimsel.") Other alterations were more mysterious.

It is almost impossible to present an untangled picture of the names our ancestors went by in the old country, or the names their American descendants knew them by. Sometimes names were transformed on documents for ancestors that never came to America simply so that these would conform to the names their descendants had adopted. The results included Yankev and Itka Alperowitz being converted to Jacob and Ada Cohen, and Reuben and Soshe Esther Alperowitz to Robert and Esther Cohen - the latter adjustment being made by Isidor Alpert when he supplied the personal information for his uncle Samuel M. Cohen's death certificate in 1928. (Nathan Cohen's 1901 death certificate listed his father as Reuben but the space for his mother's name was left blank.) Different children of the same European parents compounded the problem by anglicizing the names of those parents in as many ways: Itka became Ada, Edith, Edna or Etta depending upon the translator. At least half of Merke Alperowitz's descendants referred to her as Miriam (Merke is an old Russian-Jewish name that is also used as a term of endearment), whereas the other half had never heard this name. One granddaughter, Lillian Heller, who was brought up by Merke, was unaware that other descendants had translated this to Miriam. Familiar names have been used in appropriate settings within the text and anglicized names - the official names taken in this country - have been used in charts and the family index. Original names, if known, have been included in parentheses where applicable.

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A number of crossroads were reached during the early stages of my research that required decisions about what the perspective of this history should be. I had originally intended to write about individuals and families,

not about Russians, Lithuanians, Poles and Jews; because the struggle between the minority nationalities of Eastern Europe and their Russian masters was central to the issue of immigration, it soon became apparent that it was impossible to separate the family from the conditions under which they lived. One story could not be told without the other. The concurrent breakdown of Eastern European signature Jewish orthodoxy made the period between 1882 and 1918, when the Alperets and Cohens came to this country, one of the most cataclysmic in Jewish history.

Although, for the most part the Alpert-Cohen ancestors were young when they came to this country (their average age of under twenty made them a forward-looking and ambitious group) too many individuals cited the experiences of their parents and grandparents that had direct corollaries in the themes I found in the histories of Russia and Poland to imagine that the past released its grip the moment the immigrants set foot in America. It is regrettable that the limitation of space has forced me to compress several hundred years of complex activity into a few pages.

The Alpert-Cohen story begins with the lives of Reuben and Soshe Esther Alperowitz and concludes with a brief survey of the activities of their grandchildren and most of their great-grandchildren. Whether by chance or design, it was Bangor, Maine where the first Alpert-Cohen emigre put down roots and it was Bangor and its environs where more than half of the descendants of Reuben and Soshe Esther were born and raised. For this reason, this book also reviews the lives of all of their Bangor descendants born prior to 1920, regardless of which generation they may fall. (It should also be mentioned that I set out to be as democratic as possible in terms of the space allocated to each of my subjects, but this goal was not always practical. While, for example, little enough is known about the personalities and activities of Reuben and Soshe Esther's seven children, in the cases of Chivia and Sarah virtually all of the information that has survived focuses on their husbands. As for the generations that are closer to us in time, I have recorded what I have been told. Hence, when the salient facts of a family member's life have been presented in terms of the achievements of their spouse, or if a husband and wife's careers were intertwined, or if their relationship had a special significance to the overall direction of the family, this is what has been included. Consequently, with the exclusion of Reuben and Soshe Esther's children and grandchildren, spouses are generally not reviewed.)

The migration to Bangor spanned a period of nearly forty years that, for the sake of comprehension, has been presented by surveying the activities of the nucleus group, the Nathan Cohen family, and then expanding the discussion to reflect the arrival, residence and occupations of Nathan's brother, nieces and nephews - some of whom were at first associated with Nathan's children. These relatives came based on their age and the worsening social conditions in Russia.

The ten year gap between the arrival of Nathan and his brother Samuel M.; the decade that passed between the arrival of S.H Cohen in 1889 and his sister Alice; the twenty-four years that elapsed between Nathan's settlement in Bangor in 1882 and Isidor Alpert's relocation from New York to Maine in 1906 - these constituted the waves of immigration to Bangor. In all, the lives of over

one hundred people are reviewed, beginning with the patriarch and matriarch themselves, and traversing the expanse of forty-four grandchildren born over forty-three years. Out of this effort, it is hoped, will emerge a greater understanding of the challenges faced by our ancestors, and the sacrifices they made for us.