

*from Jim O.*

Portland, Maine

# Peddlers And Prayers

**GABE LEVENSON**  
TRAVEL WRITER

**T**raversing the wooden stairs at Levinsky's clothing store in Portland, Maine — through the labyrinth of large and small display areas and stockrooms, of faded photographs on the walls, of yellowed posters and newspaper promotions, of state-of-the-art computers and 15-foot high bins of Levis — is like walking through local history.

Levinsky's, now run by the fourth generation of the family, has been a Portland institution since Philip Levinsky, known as "the happy peddler," settled in the city more than a century ago.

The store on Congress Street, in the heart of what was a Jewish neighborhood, offers a good starting point for a tour of Portland. The present-day shop once was the family homestead.

Six hours in Maine's largest city afforded only a once-over-lightly view of Portland's general attractions and, particularly, of the activities of its Jewish community. That brief stay, however, did give us the opportunity to explore a number of highlights.

The second leg of a recent voyage on the Dolphin Line's IslandBreeze brought us from Newport, R.I., to Portland before moving on to Halifax, Nova Scotia.

— a department store on wheels — and then a small house and barn on Oxford Street. Philip made friends with officers at nearby Fort Williams, and was the only peddler allowed to sell his wares in the military installation. At the same time, he bought surplus merchandise from the fort — Army leggings, breeches, overcoats, raincoats. Neighbors would come to the barn to look over the discounted items — new, heavy-woolen breeches were priced at \$1 — and buy, usually on credit until their next week's paychecks came in.

Benevolent chefs at the fort often gave Philip huge burlap bags loaded with the bones of the meat and poultry they had served the evening before. In turn, he and his wife converted the bones into Sabbath soup — a bone-us, if readers will forgive, for Levinsky customers.

Eventually, the barn operation became an Army and Navy store, and eventually the biggest store of its kind in town, with stock ranging from the funky to the fashionable, from pre-soaked denims to the most sophisticated designer clothes.

If visitors have time for little else, a tour of Levinsky's alone will give them the *tamm* of old Jewish Portland. Philip's grandson and namesake, 70-year-old Philip II, who has turned over active management of Levinsky's to his son, Bruce, was my guide for a journey into a century of past history.



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An exploration of Jewish Portland begins downtown in the area known as the Old Port, where the Island-Breeze docked. Temple Beth El, Portland's Conservative synagogue and with 500 families the largest Jewish congregation north of Boston, has scheduled a Jewish-oriented tour of the city on Nov. 10.

On their own visitors can follow the itinerary recommended by Harry Sky, Beth El's rabbi emeritus, as well as view other cultural and historic aspects of the city. Portland is home to more than half of Maine's 4,000 Jews.

Marine Lt. Joseph Israel is the first Portland Jew of whom there is record. He was killed in 1804 fighting Barbary Coast fleets — really pirate ships.

In 1820 Maine seceded from Massachusetts to establish itself as a separate state. Jewish peddlers from Boston were encouraged to sell their goods in the villages of Maine by the liberal provision of the new state's constitution — no religious test for candidates to public office. A later law allowed merchants to open their shops on Sunday provided they had been closed on the Sabbath.

It would be another 80 years before Maine Jews would actually run and win election — in Portland. In 1902 Henry Taylor was named an alderman; Jews since then have held many offices in the city. Two Jews are among Portland's 14 aldermen today, and U.S. Sen. William Cohen, a Republican, was born in the capital city of Bangor.

Cohen's father, a baker, taught him Hebrew — which the senator can read and write — but he was raised in his mother's church as a Unitarian and does not identify with a Jewish community.

The rise of the Levinskys is a paradigm of the Jewish urban experience in Portland itself, as well as in all America. It is much like "The Rise of David Levinsky," Abraham Cahan's classic novel on that theme.

Born in a Russian shtetl, Philip Levinsky landed in Portland in 1892 — when the bulk of Jewish immigrants arrived there — and quickly accumulated enough money selling buttons, needles and thread from a backpack to buy himself a pushcart. From this veritable mini-department store he hawked notions up and down the streets of the Old Port.

Philip eventually had the means to buy a horse and wagon



**Philip Levinsky II in front of the family-owned department store, a Portland landmark for four generations.** Fran Tepper

Philip's oldest son, Ken, is the executive director of Temple Beth El, an institution that perhaps is the best statement of present-day Jewish life in Portland. The handsome building on a quiet, shaded street in the green, outer reaches of the city is a museum of another kind. A mural painting of the Giving of the Ten Commandments at the entrance to the sanctuary, a scul-

ture by William Zorach portraying the Akedah of Abraham and Isaac, the splendid stained-glass windows depicting the Creation, the presence of Carolyn Braun, Maine's first woman rabbi — these are indices of the transformation of Portland Jewry.

The peddlers are now professors in one or another of the city's several colleges. Or they are lawyers or doctors or other representatives of a comfortable, well-educated populace. They are congregants at Beth El, or at the Reform congregation Bet Ha'Am, or just around the corner from Beth El at the Orthodox Shaarey Tphiloh, the oldest congregation in Portland. Or at Chabad House, which offers home hospitality to out-of-towners with just a few day's notice. Other kosher meals are available at the rabbinically certified Penny Wise Super Market or Sunday morning at the Beth El minyan.

The Jewish Community Center, (207) 772-1959, offers details on a visit to Jewish Portland: phone numbers, hours of worship, the mikveh at Shaarey Tphiloh, a nondenominational Hebrew day school, cemeteries, monuments to heroes of the two world wars and more.

Portland, and Old Port especially, are full of ethnic restaurants (more per capita than any other U.S. city except San Francisco), craft shops, bookstores, museums (a strong, permanent exhibit of Winslow Homer at the Art Museum), live jazz, theater and ballet, a symphony orchestra, Victorian mansions and excursions to picturesque resorts nearby, like President George Bush's Kennebunkport.

Such attractions are the marks of a smallish New England metropolis (population 65,000) with largish aspirations on the cutting edge of the 21st century. Call the Portland Convention and Visitors Bureau at (207) 772-4994. □

*Second in a three-part series on the cruise aboard the IslandBreeze. Next week: Halifax, Nova Scotia.*