Chaim Merson

"No Jew is ever the first in any town; there is always one who had been there before him," wrote the historian and archivist Jacob Rader Marcus. He gives the example of Jacob Barsimson, who led a party of immigrants sent by the Dutch West India Company from Holland in 1654, one month before the Portuguese Jews came from Recife, Brazil, to New Amsterdam. Chaim Merson's family followed them 250 years later to New York in 1909. His father had been an expert at cutting uppers in a shoe factory in Minsk, but he saw no future there. He left his wife and four children in 1904 while he explored the possibilities in America from Monroe Street in New York and boarded in his sister's flat.

By the time he sent for his family, he had rented a furnished apartment in Brooklyn, away from the pushcarts, in a mixed neighborhood. The mother and children had traveled from Latvia in a small boat to Bremen. They had no sooner boarded the large boat to cross the Atlantic Ocean when cholera broke out among the steerage passengers. The ship was four days late and short of food. Fights for bread were common among parents. Eight-year-old Chaim, his thin, older brother, and two younger sisters had to pass a rigid examination before they could even leave the ship. The first year in school Chaim spent fighting English-speaking boys who called him "greenhorn," "kike," "redhead," etc. The family moved two blocks away after three after-school fights. Somehow he graduated from P.S. 165 in 1916.

Chaim's older brother, a violinist, was frail and had to be sent to a tuberculosis sanitarium. Chaim was then essentially the oldest child and was expected to go to work to help support his sisters, Polly and Lillian; his brother Abe; and the new baby, Ethel. But Chaim wanted to go to high school. He walked three miles to save the five-cent carfare and even rode on the cowcatcher of a trollycar for two miles, but the snow and cold numbed his poorly shod feet. After three months he gave up.

His father died in the shoe factory in 1917; his employers paid for the funeral. His mother was a proud woman who would not ask for help, but the relatives, especially a rich cousin, gave her enough money to buy a candy store. It was open from 6 A.M. to midnight. Chaim closed the store and often forgot to wheel Ethel in to the store before he fell asleep on the floor.

It was obvious to Harry Day, an uncle in Lewiston, that the family could not go on this way. He asked them to come to Maine. He rented a small shack in Auburn, the twin city of Lewiston, where ten other Jewish families lived. The fathers would peddle and the rest of the families managed with a cow and small garden.

Chaim's sisters, Polly and Lil, sold milk from the barn behind the house; Isadore, the older brother, a violinist, was brought home from the sanitarium to die, and Chaim was put to work washing bottles in cold water in a beer-bottling plant. He would have to lift a 190-pound barrel of beer and stand on a wet floor twelve hours a day.

Soon the flu epidemic of 1917 came to Auburn, and everything closed—schools, stores, and mills. There was no money for anything, but when Chaim heard the shipyard in Bath was hiring, he managed to get to the YMCA and actually found a job. He worked five weeks tightening bolts before the wrench slipped, and he received $500 compensation for the injury to his hand.

With this money he opened a grocery store at age 18. Every prospect for the good life was there until a recession came in 1921. He had $2,000 in merchandise and $3,000 in bills. His two largest creditors could not agree on his future. One said, "Go ahead, you'll pull out of this." He continued to work, but the grocery store was not successful.

His mother had been cooking for single men, bringing in some money. Chaim felt free enough to go to work for his friend Nathan Ward, his future wife's brother, in the bottling business. By 1925 he went to New York to work in a grocery store.

Before he left he bought a house for the family and his mother opened a restaurant. Lil remembered her mother hit the girls on the head to make them duck if the Health Department inspector came in while she was combing their hair in the store. Years later Lil came charging into the restaurant, terrified, to whisper to her mother that she had blood in her pants. Her mother slapped her face and said, "Now you'll have a good complexion." Lil was sure every man in the store knew Lil's problem.

After a few months Chaim came back to Lewiston and he opened a large grocery store with two meat cutters. Pete Issacson, a banker by that time, gave him a $2,000 loan. He married Lee Ward, raised a son and a daughter, and had a fine reputation as a successful businessman. Chaim suffered a massive heart attack at age sixty. He left the store for another career.

In the meantime his brother Abe died. Chaim grieved more for him than he had for his father. He had been a gentle soul who stood for the finer things in life for Chaim. Polly went to Boston to study home economics when she graduated from high school; Lil became a great secretary, and Ethel became a nurse after completing a training course at Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia.

Ethel married a handsome German refugee, Arno Fleisher, who learned to manufacture shoes in Lewiston, but Chaim had to sign a note for him to obtain a loan from Pete Issacson. Later Polly's husband, Lou Prolman, needed a partner, and that lost $15,000 for him.

At last Chaim went back to school. At age sixty he took a course from the New York School of Finance in Portland. He did so well that he worked for three different stock brokers until they went bankrupt during the recession of 1930.

While most seventy-year-old men fish, play golf, and enjoy a card game, Chaim had only a taste of this kind of leisure. Shortly after he came to Lake Maranacook where he built a camp near his sister Ethel's camp, his wife Lena began to have circulatory problems in one leg. Medical care in Maine had reached the stage where serious illness had to be treated at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, but Lena had faith in her doctor in Lewiston, where she lived during the winter. By the time her doctor decided Lena's problem was serious, she had to have the leg amputated. Chaim, of course, suffered along with Lena, and the two had many difficult decisions to make. He argued that they should live in

Florida, where the winters were not severe and she could adjust to her prosthesis. She had never enjoyed parties and argued that her family was all she needed. The following year the other leg was amputated in Boston. She was near death many times, but finally she recovered and was fitted with a special wheelchair and shelf that permitted Chaim to move her from the chair to the car and back to the chair. Her spirits rose and her personality changed almost completely. Chaim bought a condominium in Florida, and they went down to furnish it. Now Chaim could play golf and enjoy the sun. In a few months he died at the breakfast table. Polly had died of heart failure while swimming. Chaim's sisters were heartbroken. Lillian said, "Chaim should not have died. He was such a good person! He raised us all. He deserved better."

What was Auburn like when Chaim first saw it at age sixteen? There was one butcher, one baker, and two grocery stores. His was one of thirteen Jewish families living in a village similar to the one he left in Russia. Each family had at least one cow that supplied most of the food, and one member of the family peddled in a horse and wagon. Chaim remembered a time when they had two cows and both broke loose. When he found them a half mile into some dense woods, he put the calf on his back, legs around his neck, and pulled the cow home three miles on a string.

People lived very frugally. One man bought one herring and one long loaf of bread a week. He'd slit the bread lengthwise, insert the herring and keep pushing the fish through so that he had a taste of herring with his bread all week. He was thus able to save enough money to send for his family to join him in America.

Hyman H. Lampert's daughter, Jennie L. Lichter, married a grocer who formed a chain of groceries throughout Maine. These people were not well educated, but they sent their children to school; many went through Bates College.

How did they get along with their neighbors? Lincoln Street in Lewiston was known as "Little Canada." The French Canadians who came about the same time as the Jews and also spoke no English worked in the mills. Since both groups were immigrants, equally despised by the English, Irish, and German settled folk, they got along fairly well. In fact these two groups got along better than the Jews of Lewiston got along with the Jews of Auburn, even thought all the Jews were Orthodox at the time. The old saying, "Where there are two Jews, there are three

opinions" held true here, too. Each town had its own synagogue and competed for members.

Remember the little guy who slid the herring through the bread? He died a wealthy man through judicious real estate deals. His daughter gave the Jews of Lewiston-Auburn $600,000 to build a new synagogue for the Jews of both towns.

How was Pete Isaacson able to help so many immigrants? After all, he was a poor boy who did not even go to Bates College. Harry Day, Chaim's uncle, set him up in a bowling alley in New Hampshire after he married his first cousin at eighteen. That didn't work out, so he went to work in a soda bottling plant in Bath. He began to read law in his cousin's law office and passed the bar after one year. Former Governor Louis Brann took him into his office, and when the banks closed in 1933, Governor Brann took him along to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. When the banks opened, Pete Isaacson went to work at Depositor's Trust Bank, where he became chairman of the board.