

Fred and Sara Sterns

Sara Sterns came from a family that traced its ancestry to the fifteenth century. Her maiden name, Hoos, was spelled Goos, Haas, and Glass, depending on the country members of the family settled in when they left Holland.

In Bangor her father had a relative, James Gimpel Striar, a successful merchant, who was "undoubtedly the greatest contributor to Jewish causes in the history of Maine Jewry," Sara said. He is often referred to as "the man who taught Jews to give." Sara's father, Jacob Hoos, also lived by the ancient rabbinical maxim, "The world rests on three things: the study of the law, divine service, and acts of benevolence." He was joined by Max Kagan, the shoe manufacturer; Joseph Emple, the knitting mill owner; and Moses Byer, the canvas supplier. "Their names are synonymous with charitable and educational endeavors, unhampered by the bounds of the creed or race," said Sara.

Jacob Hoos was not a peddler. He came from Kowel, near Warsaw (then Russia) to his relatives in Buffalo to avoid conscription in the czar's army. When he was eight years old and his stepsister was seven, they were betrothed by his father, a Talmudic scholar who had married Sara's widowed grandmother. Jacob was seventeen years old when he married Rose. After they lived in Buffalo a few years, Rose suffered from allergies, tuberculosis, and emphysema. Jacob sought help from his relatives in Bangor.

In Europe he had been a scholar, a maskil (enlightened religious man), supported by his father. When he came to America he taught himself English by reading newspapers and working in a fruit store.

When the family moved to Bangor and later to Old Town, Jacob opened a grocery store that was outstanding for its modernity and sanitation. It caught the attention of Joe Cooper, a successful cattle and meat dealer. He offered to put Jacob in the wholesale and retail business of an S.S. Pierce store, which dealt in gourmet foods, but he would be required to work on Saturdays. Jacob turned down this lucrative offer.

There were four children: Benjamin, who became a scientist; Sidney, an actuary and economist; Harvey, a gerontology professor at the University of Ohio; and Sara, who was teaching French in Boston when she married Fred Sterns, the former football hero at Colby. He was a successful merchant in Skowhegan; Sara left Boston.

Fred's father, Harry Stern, had peddled in the northern and western parts of Maine. He opened small stores in Hartland, Skowhegan, and Waterville; he traveled from one to the other until they either failed or succeeded. He put his sons George and Herbert in Waterville, and Fred took the Skowhegan store. Both stores became large successful department stores.

Most Jews in Skowhegan and Hartland attended the Waterville synagogue and depended on the *shochet* there for kosher meat and chickens, especially when Hains was the spiritual leader and *shochet*. Religious education for the children was too difficult to obtain even though Waterville was only eighteen miles away; the roads were poor and transportation was hazardous in winter. There was a Jewish camp, Modin, but when religious instruction was merely incidental, the Sterns felt the need for a camp to serve religious families.

It was quite providential then that Philip Lown, the shoe manufacturer, suggested that a new camp should be established for the teaching of Judaism to Maine children who had been deprived of religious education, and Lown was well known to the Sterns as a frequent visitor on behalf of the Maine Jewish Council. The Sterns, the Emple of Bangor, Wilners of Lewiston, and the Bernsteins of Portland formed part of the board of Camp Lown when each contributed \$5,000. Lown bought the land for \$20,000 in 1945. Dr. Kohansky ran the camp for twenty years. The camp

prepared boys for bar mitzvah and instilled pride in their heritage. Sara remembers Lown as an authoritarian who rode roughshod over volunteers. He was not realistic about details. He wanted the camp to take children from other states, too, but the board felt the camp should only take children living in Maine. This difference led to the dissolution of the camp, but the Sterns are grateful for the Jewish education their two sons received there. While I was interviewing the Sterns, their grandson was receiving his Jewish education by telephone from Rabbi Geller in Auburn.

Schnorrers who came to the Skowhegan Sterns were never turned away. Sometimes they were taken to a restaurant and given car fare. When the Methodist minister said the church needed a new roof, he was given the money. Ethiopian Jews in Ethiopia, the pioneers in Palestine, and the Yeshiva University in New York regularly received help. The Catholic priest came in every day just to chat—even when he did not ask for money. One day he asked Fred to come to church to pray. Fred quoted Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver from “How Does a Jew Differ From Other Religious Men?”

- a) Man does not need to be saved from some original sin.
- b) Man should enjoy life.
- c) All men are equal.
- d) Men are free.
- e) Death is not better than life.

Human brotherhood, universal peace, unity, freedom, and compassion are fundamental. The priest never came in again.

Sara and Laura Wolman of Waterville started a Hadassah chapter that is still flourishing. Sara also paints on slate.

Fred bought the Margaret Chase Smith home that is now combined with the Fairview to form the Reddington–Fairview Hospital. He served as chairman of the hospital board and raised funds for the hospital. For the United Jewish Appeal, Fred and Sara traveled all over Maine. They are still active in B'nai B'rith and contribute to many causes now that they are retired.