Veteran Sportswriter Shirley Povich

The Povich Family

Even before the assassination of Alexander II, Jews had to be deliberately injured to avoid conscription in the czar's cruel army, where they were forcibly converted to Greek Orthodoxy or shot. It was during this time that one-eyed Simon Povich and his twelve-year-old son, Nathan, left Baltomans, near Kovna, Lithuania, in 1875. He started a family of businessmen and women, lawyers, and journalists in Maine. Why Maine? To earn a living one had to peddle, and the license in Maine was only fifty dollars (half the price of a license in Massachusetts), and the territory was wide open! Before the turn of the century, peddlers could stock up in Boston, take the trolley car to Portland, and fan out into the southern and western portions of the agricultural state or elect to travel along the Atlantic coast to Bar Harbor. The Poviches took the coastal route.

By the time Simon sent for his wife and four daughters, his wife had died, so a stranger brought the children to Boston. Cousins of Simon helped him raise the children while he peddled with Nathan, and despite many hardships they learned English quickly. The oldest girl, Jennie, married a peddler, Joe Solovich, and each one opened a store in Bath in 1900. Soon after this, her sister Ida married a peddler named Miller, and they also settled in Bath.

Nathan liked Bar Harbor. When he was twenty-one years old he sent for his cousin, Rosa, in Lithuania and married her as soon as she left the ship in Boston. The first ceremony by the justice of the peace was not enough for the seventeen-year-old Orthodox Rosa; Nathan had to be married again by a rabbi in Bangor. By 1888 he had opened a furniture store and could support a wife a year later when he brought Rosa to Bar Harbor. In those days and for many years afterwards, Bar Harbor was open for three months as a resort town for the extremely wealthy people from the rest of the world but was practically dead during the rest of the year. Ellsworth, a few miles west and sheltered from the ocean, was an all-year-round town with a sizable Jewish community and good transportation to Bangor and Portland. It was in Ellsworth that Rosa gave birth to Eva, the first of their ten children.

One day when Nathan was in Boston on a business trip, their second child, Samuel, aged two, slipped away from Rosa as she spoke to a customer and drowned in a rain puddle in the street. A neighbor told Rosa's grown children (the mother never spoke of this tragedy) how Rosa bravely wrapped the child in a blanket and rode the train to Bangor to give him a Jewish burial.

Rosa had an unusually broad education for a woman of her day. She knew the Talmud and Torah as well as the men did, but in addition she was secretly tutored in Russian, Lithuanian, mathematics, and literature in Europe. In Bar Harbor she had a tutor, Mrs. Martha Simson, who became a devoted friend.

Rosa's children remember that she was known as the prettiest woman in Bar Harbor. She kept a kosher home with the help of itinerant slaughterers and the meat merchants in Bangor.

Although the family was very friendly with the neighbors, none of the children (Eva, Goldie, Celia, Morris, Abe, Jay, Shirley, Doris, and Bernard) was allowed to eat outside their home. After a few years the family moved to Boston, where it would be easier to keep a kosher home, but Nathan and Rosa could not compete with Filene's department store. Customers came when Filene's closed and expected to beat prices down. This finally drove the family back to Bar Harbor.

Meanwhile, Simon made a good living buying and selling real estate in Bath. In 1914 Bath was a boom town with five shipbuilding plants and more people looking for homes than the coast could supply. He and Jennie persuaded Nathan and Rosa to move to Bath. Simon gave them a lot to build a house on, and they felt lucky. Many other people were sleeping under porches and on the muddy streets. Nathan opened a furniture store that also sold notions like collar buttons until World War II ended. They prospered. Everybody in the family worked in the store except Eva, who had married her second cousin Morris.

Nathan bought a huge white house on the Kennebec River soon after the family came to Bath, and it is this porch-encircled house that is still a summer home for the visiting children and grandchildren. On the wide stairway, the wall supports large oval portraits of Nathan, Rosa, and their nine children. It is the custom of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren to greet each picture in the morning and to bid them all "good night" when they retire.

Although many in the community were skeptical, the YMCA offered the use of a room if Jewish services could be held early on Friday evenings and on holidays to free the room for other activities afterwards. After holidays were observed in the Hall of Eagles, the Severt Building, the Red Men's Building, and in a loft over the Solovich store, the wives formed a Hebrew Ladies Society to raise funds for a synagogue. The first meeting was held in Harry Aaronson's tailor shop. Twenty-six ladies—Rosa Povich; her daughter, Eva; the mesdames Erik Aaronson, Bloom, Brown, Cohen, Goldstein, Greenblum, Isaacson, Petlock, Shanblom, Savage, Greenblatt, I. Singer, J. Solovich; more Poviches; and D. Rosen from Brunswick—elected Mrs. Nathan Povich president and Eva secretary. They raffled off an embroidered pillow cover (made by Mrs. Povich), held parties, and donated funds. The younger children, Doris and her brother Shirley, carried the dishes home from the fundraisers. Meanwhile the men argued

about the size and shape of the building and prayed early each morning in groups of at least ten, a minyan. In the Povich home, five boys and the father made a good start on a minyan. The boys would meet the six o'clock ferry from Boston and invite any men who "looked" like a Jew to join them. Another source was the man who came to the store and asked, "Vos macht a Yid?" This was interpreted to mean, "Can a Jew make a living here?"

The architect, Mr. Tripp, suggested they should have about $2,000 to start. Harry Cohen finally collected $2,400 by appealing to non-Jews like Reuben Baxter (who later became governor), who gave the largest contribution, $200. Every Sunday three men would go to adjacent towns to solicit funds. Mr. Gediman would entertain with his guitar, Maria Petlock would sing, and the children performed plays at the monthly fund raisers.

Finally, a promissory note for $3,300 at 6 percent interest was signed, and the forty-two members, led by Simon Povich (who gave $52), were ready to begin. Nathan, impatient with all the conflicting ideas presented to the architect, went ahead and hired a contractor to build. On January 29, 1922, on a sunny afternoon, 250 people gathered for the dedication of the synagogue since the first floor was finished and under roof. Nathan Povich carried the Torah scroll, while Nathan Singer carried the prayer book. They were followed by the American flag and women carrying lighted candles. Morris Cohen, the first cantor, sang Psalm 30. Three rabbis spoke, including the first rabbi of the congregation, Charles Arek. Everybody sang Hatikva, the Israeli national anthem, and the Star Spangled Banner. The wood stove in the corner gave enough heat to make this service a promising beginning.

Bath could not afford a full-time rabbi. By 1927, however, the synagogue could be recognized as the "Jewish Church" by the Gentiles because the second floor was finished. On September 23, 1934, the mortgage was burned, the Ner Tamid (the ever-burning lamp) glowed, and a plaque naming the founders was installed. But the depression was too severe for twenty-six families, who left for other states. After the Depression (1929–1945) a pulpitless rabbi would be invited for the High Holy Days. Now the lovely little building is used on High Holy Days and occasionally during the rest of the year.

A non-Jew, George Davenport, who owned a hotel in Boston, left a legacy that helps to maintain all religious buildings in Bath.

Of him it was said, "He lived like a fool but died like a gentleman." Since 1925 each religious group in Bath gets $1,500 per year for repairs, and needy students are granted scholarships.

Among the Jews, education was paramount in Europe and in America. While non-Jews dropped out of high school, Jewish boys went on to college. The Smith family produced two doctors; the Levines produced three dentists; the Poviches produced many lawyers and an internationally famous sportswriter, Shirley Povich. Nathan Povich would bring tutors from Boston to prepare his sons for bar mitzvah, but these immigrants learned more English than the boys learned Hebrew.

As Shirley looks back on his boyhood in Maine, he says he did not mind the cold. The children looked forward to winter as the time to skate, tramp through hip-high snow, gather firewood, and help in the furniture store. Early in the twentieth century, stoves were a major item of every room in the house. The five Povich boys became experts in assembling and installing the stoves their father bought and sold. They learned to fit pipes into chimneys, the proper use of nuts and bolts, and the differences between kitchen and living room stoves. After 1916 winters were spent in Bath, but the family moved back to Bar Harbor every summer, when business was brisk due to the tourists and summer resident millionaires.

Famous people like the financier philanthropist Jacob H. Schiff, who had a summer home in Bar Harbor, were frequent visitors in Nathan's home. He had Horatio Alger, a struggling young writer (who later wrote about boys who succeeded despite great odds), as a resident tutor for his children. Non-Jews who were customers became friends.

When Shirley caddied and accepted Ed B. McLean's (publisher of the *Washington Post*) offer of employment, he was only sixteen years old. His sisters Celia and Goldie and his brothers Abe and Jay were in Washington. He enrolled in the Georgetown University Law School but transferred to the liberal arts program a year and a half later, working at the *Washington Post* all this time. When he became sports editor, he left college and never returned to earn a degree. He grew up in a sports-minded family. Even his father watched football and baseball games. He credits the friendly support of the staff of the *Washington Post*, as well as his own hard work, for his success. He was awarded many honors during his career including the Grantland Rice Prize and Headliners, as well as election to the Baseball Hall of Fame. His writing reflected his warm

understanding of the players and the coaches. No one could accuse him of cruel, unwarranted attacks for the sake of personal advancement. He respected the need of the players for privacy and time to unwind after a game.

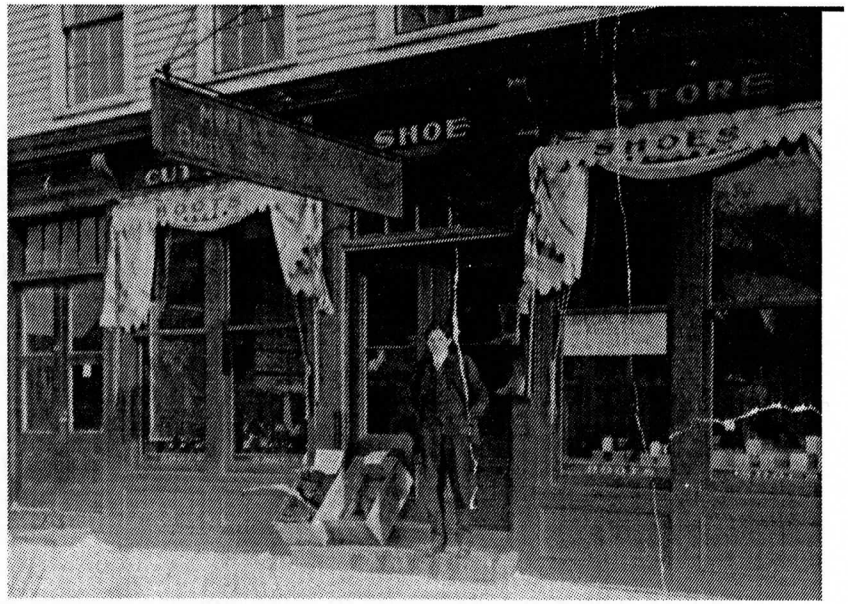
Shirley served as a war correspondent with the U.S. Marines in Iwo Jima and Okinawa during World War II. He too carried a gun, for as he says, the bombs dropped on everybody. He married Ethyl Friedman, a native of Washington. They have three children—David, an attorney; Lynn, a former assistant editor of *U.S. News and World Report*; and Maury, a television reporter in Philadelphia who is married to Connie Chung. For many winters, Nathan and Rosa lived in Washington, and after Nathan died in 1931, Rosa accompanied Shirley and his family to Florida, where Shirley covered spring training of the baseball teams. Shirley continued to be faithful to his Jewish heritage and prayed on Jewish holidays in Japan, Mexico, Germany, Cuba, Italy, and England while he covered stories for the Washington Post.

Nathan and Rosa brought teachers into their home to live with the family. These teachers would live in the Povich home for six months at a time. The home was filled with religious discussion and ceremonies—no formal instruction was required to make the children feel Jewish.

The parents were passionately religious. Abe was sent to Portland to attend Hebrew School. Bernard, the youngest, was not too impressed with the festivities following his own bar mitzvah ceremony—he slipped out and went to the movies.

While the family lived in Bar Harbor, Shirley caddied for Ed B. McLean, owner of the *Washington Post*. When he was asked to join the McLeans on their private railroad coach to Washington on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, Shirley's mother forbade him to go. Nevertheless, Mr. McLean invited him to join the staff of the newspaper where he became sports editor at age twenty. He worked for the *Post* for fifty-two years and still writes special columns. Celia and Goldie worked in the Department of Commerce and later in the U.S. Coast Guard. Morris was killed in an auto accident in 1936. Abe and Bernard are lawyers in Washington. Doris, a graduate of Emerson College, is a happy grandmother in Silver Spring, Maryland, who keeps the family history for the enjoyment of all, especially those who find it amazing that a grandmother remembers her grandfather. Eva married her second cousin, Morris Povich, who had come to Bath in 1905 from Boston.

Shirley Povich, left, who has been writing about sports for The Washington Post since the '20s, receives a hug and a plaque from Ben Bradlee, the newspaper's vice president at-large, during the Anti-Defamation League dinner at the Willard Inter-Continental Hotel. Povich, 89, who started as a copyboy in 1922 for $12 a week, was honored with a lifetime achievement award by the league.



Morris Povich in front of his store

Morris Povich

Morris Povich left school when he was fifteen years old to avoid military service for the czar. He knew Hebrew and Russian only but he made his way through Germany to England. His parents, bakers for the Russian soldiers, were quite poor. The eight dollar ship ticket was sent to him from America, and Morris repaid the loan with a ten dollar bill. How difficult it was to save ten dollars from a job hauling bushels of coal for two dollars a week! His only possession was his siddur (prayer book.) He lived with Simon Povich, his cousin from Lithuania. From coal he progressed to selling writing paper at twenty-five cents a pound on the road. Later he peddled clothes and stockings. Morris had learned a few words of English on the ship, but by the time he opened his clothing store in Bath in 1910, he was fluent in English. He married Eva Povich in the kindergarten classroom in Bar Harbor in 1914. He encountered no anti-Semitism in his travels—even in Waterville and Oakland where others had warned him of difficulty.

When Eva died after their two children, Don and Albert, were adults, he married Eva's sister, Goldie, who had returned from Washington, D.C.

Despite his asthma (he spent a long time in the Togus Sanitarium early in his marriage), Morris served as alderman and was the first Jew elected to the Bath City Council. He was a bank officer in three banks and gave time and money to support the City Poor Farm, even though no Jews were in need of its services. As the first Jew to be admitted to the local Masons, Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, and Elks, he believed that "a person has to make himself very attractive to Gentiles." As a conservative Republican, he fit into the prosperous community easily.

He was also a good friend of John Cary, the president of Bath Savings Bank, with whom he would discuss articles in the *Wall Street Journal.* Indeed, Mr. Cary, a graduate of Boston University Law, advised Povich's son Albert to go to Georgetown Law School, where he obtained his law degree. The Povich family admired Mr. Cary's mother, who scrubbed floors to send him to college at a time when education was not a priority among non-Jews.

Albert remembers it was very difficult to keep a kosher home. The itinerant shochet (ritual slaughterer) would use newspaper for sleeve covers splattered in chicken blood. He found these men repulsive and could not understand why they were necessary.

Donald expanded his father's clothing business to found a store in Damariscotta and another in Wiscasset.

Morris was also a founder of the Bath Israel Synagogue with Nathan and Simon Povich; B. Gediman and his sons, Arthur and Henry; Louis and Morris Petlock; Abram Miller; Harry Brown; the Solomon Greenblatt family; and the Isaac Mikelsky family. In 1972 the fiftieth anniversary of the congregation was celebrated, even though meetings to start a synagogue were started in 1919 and services had been part of the way of life in the Jewish homes.

For amusement in the summer the families would picnic on Thomas Point. In the winter they would visit each other after the stores closed; the cars were stored during the winter months.

According to Doris Povich Mensh, the fountainhead of family lore, Bath in the 1880s was a Gentile city—staid and solid Yankee, but by 1900 a dozen Jewish families had settled in Bath. The 1914 ship-building boom attracted more than thirty Jewish families and many French Canadian families.

What was their idea of a Yankee? Yankees were born in New England, preferably Maine, and spoke like a Yankee—not boisterously. They were taciturn, paid cash for a house, did not believe in credit and therefore had no mortgage. They followed their minister's preaching to the letter. They were narrow-minded and very strict with their children.

The Povich family lived in the same house most of their lives, just as their neighbors did, so that a close friendly relationship developed between the French Canadian Catholics, the High Episcopalians, and the Jews who remained in Bath. Even those children who settled elsewhere visited former neighbors when they came back in the summer.

Don and his wife, Janet, visited Morris often, but Albert and his family lived in Bethesda, Maryland and came to Maine only once a year. Morris was never lonely; he read the *Wall Street Journal.*

Ida Povich Dondis

Ida Povich Dondis

Rosa Povich's brothers, Abraham and Michael, were tanners in Europe, but when they came to Maine at the end of the nineteenth century, tanning was passé, and peddling was a good way to earn a living if you could not speak English and had no capital. Michael was under five feet tall, but his sense of humor compensated for that. His ingenuity led him from the junk business to a grocery

store. He, too, married his cousin from Baltomans, Kovna, in New York and came to Ellsworth to join his Povich sister and cousins. His son, Shirley, operated the store in Ellsworth and practiced law as well.

Michael's daughter, Ida Dondis, inherited his sense of humor and ingenuity. How else could she have served as president of her chapter of Hadassah for fifty years? Two or three women from each town around Rockland, like Belfast and Camden, would meet in her home or at the Whitehall Inn. The Samoset Hotel was reputed to be anti-Semitic until recent years; as president of the Rockland Garden Club, Ida refused to have luncheons there.

Ida and her husband, Joe Dondis, weathered the hard times after World War I by buying fish on the islands off the coast and selling it on the mainland. Sometimes they made a little money, but there were times when they recouped only twenty-five cents on the dollar. In 1920 they went into the theater business, renting films and showing them in the old building near the Thorndike Hotel in Rockland.

Shortly after they started, the whole block of buildings burned down, and Ida and Joe bought the land for $7,500. They built a theater and two stores. They had put a $10,000 organ into the theater, but in the 30s, First National–Paramount had a monopoly on films, and they could not rent films. They even sent a letter and money to William Howard Taft to fight the monopoly, but they never heard from him. "Not too many honest things happened then," Ida remembered.

For some reason the film of the Dempsey–Tunney fight was barred in Maine, but in desperation Ida's husband obtained it and showed it at the Bijou theater in Bangor. With two partners, he toured the state and took in $38,000. By the time they reached Rumford, they were arrested on a complaint filed by Paramount. The case was settled when Dondis agreed to accept only half of the profit in nine theaters including those in Calais, St. Stephen, and Skowhegan. Senator Margaret Chase Smith's husband was president of the bank in Skowhegan in 1930 when Dondis approached him for a loan to build a theater there. Mr. Smith, who was feuding with the owner of a theater there, was only too happy to lend him the money to squeeze his enemy out of business. Dondis died in 1940, but his widow remained very active in the theater in Rockland, even remodeling it when she was eighty years old.

Ida graduated from Ellsworth High School and Castine

Normal School. She taught in Ellsworth before her marriage in 1914. Her husband had a Coca-Cola franchise before and during World War I. After the war, no one wanted Coca-Cola; he gave it up and, of course, regretted it later. He sold rum during Prohibition; Ida sold hot dogs. It took wits and daring to survive.

She remembered Bar Harbor before 1920, when cars were allowed in. The very rich, including the Jacob H. Schiff and Joseph Pulitzer families, were frequent visitors in Nathan Povich's furniture store. She sat on Schiff's lap as a child and later typed for him. She enjoyed waiting on the rich in her aunt's rooming house during the summer. She remembered the wealthy ladies in their long white gloves and feathered hats greeting the pedestrians from their carriages. The horse shows and dog shows brought people like Mrs. Ed McLean (owner of the Hope Diamond) in long white gowns accompanied by liveried coachmen. "Gentility was also the hallmark of wealth. After the cars came the loud, uncouth rich, and the whole scene changed."

Ida's mother sold picture frames and notions while her father peddled. They were so poor that her mother offered to leave her wedding ring for the five dollar postage due on a box of frames, but the Railway Express agent trusted her to pay when she could. There were ten Jewish families and a synagogue in Ellsworth when Mike (Ida's father) opened a fruit store there. He belonged to the Masons and Odd Fellows. Ida remembers how popular he was for his witticisms; his incessant smoking finally did him in. When he was told by a policeman in Bangor that he was going the wrong way on a one-way street, he replied, "I'm going only one way!"

He used to buy junk from the manager of the Black Estate, a museum with pretensions. One day he drove his team up to the front door. The manager was horrified by the bedraggled horse and told Mike never to come to the front again, but when he was chided, he replied, "T'aint the same horse." His family adored Mike, and the children remember a happy childhood.

Ida remembers how proudly Anna Mae Dutton showed off her Jewish pupils, even when they said, "To the shitty I will go noble prince."

Ida worked as a waitress with Edna St. Vincent Millay's sister at the Whitehall Inn. A wealthy woman sent Edna to school. Ida contributed the beautiful memorial to the poet on Mt. Batty,

where anyone can see "Six mountains in a wood" and "Five Islands in a bay." In Ida's lovely home, a picture of the memorial hangs alongside beautiful landscapes painted by Ida herself, as well as paintings created by her daughter-in-law, a dean at Boston University, who is married to Ida's son Harold, a lawyer. Her other son, Meredith, is in the furniture business in Rockland. His daughter, Jo, a Wellesley graduate, is a television reporter; her sister is in law school.

Ida was a co-worker in the office of the ship-building firm where the tall, beautiful Louise Berliawsky was employed. For coaching her Latin while she was in high school, Louise gave Ida two of her sculptures. Ida remembers when Charles Nevelson, the corporation lawyer, came to the office and met Louise. He was so impressed with the eighteen-year-old clerk, he sent his Oxford graduate brother to see her. Although he was fifteen years older than Louise, he was determined to marry her. When this distinguished gentleman came to call on her parents, Mrs. Berliawsky's first question, "Are you Jewish?", did not discourage him. She invited him to have a glass of tea in the parlor but told him "You are too old." He declared, "I'll love your gorgeous daughter and send her to Pratt Institute for six months to see if she has talent." Louise married him, went to art school, had a son, and divorced Charles Nevelson eighteen months later. Ida loved Nevelson's sculpture and admired her as a person, even though she says, "Louise was a bitch—she'd as soon insult you as look at you." Louise persevered through years of poverty in New York; without her brother's help she might have had to give up. She came back to Rockland as an international artist. Her special room at the Samoset Hotel, the Louise Nevelson, contains some of her work, and the Farnsworth Museum spent $50,000 to bring several samples of her sculpture to exhibit in 1979.

Ida remembered the Dave Rubenstein family that is now gone from Maine. Dave couldn't read or write, but he knew a valuable antique when he saw one. The Biddles, Fords, and Rockefellers were his customers. His wife was his bookkeeper. When he died, it took four days to auction off his furniture, silver, and china. Under the rug in the front of the store, checks for as much as $2,200 were found. Two of his three surviving daughters had tried to move some of his possessions the night before the auction, but government agents caught up with the vans as they were leaving.

Ida identified Isador Gordon, whose memorial stands in the garden of the Farnsworth Museum, as a wheeler-dealer in the fish business. His family is scattered too. Saul Schweicher was one of several sardine canners. Rockland still has a cannery, but the owner may not be a practicing Jew.

Ida's father and her husband bought an abandoned church and converted it to a synagogue. Although Jews came from Camden and smaller communities, they could not afford a full-time rabbi. They all pay dues and hire a rabbi from New York for the High Holy Days. It is still used for memorial services and funerals. The composer Hugo Weisgall served as cantor.

This community suffered during the depressions before and after the world wars, but Jews never applied for charity. They contributed to drives for general relief and for Jews in need in Europe and Israel, but in Rockland they managed. Of course, the children and grandchildren of the early settlers, like the Rosenberg orthodontists, moved to Portland, Massachusetts, Washington, D.C., etc., but not because they were unemployed. Most were college graduates, but they sought the companionship of Jews.

There's a gentleness characteristic of the American Povich family known in Yiddish as edelkeit. It is a gentility that seems to envelop each Povich in attitude and speech.