

The History of the Family, from Vilna to Waterville: Eric L. Bloom

.....I want to state a couple of facts before I began. I may be from Brookline, Massachusetts, possess a Boston accent, but I don't "park my car in Harvard Yard." I do park my heart in Waterville, Maine.

.....Also, Before I start my talk, I want to dedicate the talk to my cousin Audrey Wolff Shutzer who was the 2nd grandchild of William & Sarah Levine and my Auntie Tema Kaplan Cushner who is the 5th grandchild of William & Sarah Levine. Neither of them are present this evening, but they are represented by their sons and their families. We are all thinking of them because Audrey and Tema, like all of you, are part of our family history.

..... As you know, I am Eric Bloom. I am the 2nd son of Morty and Sara Lee Kaplan Bloom, the 4th grandson of Eddie & Betty Levine Kaplan, and the 12th great grandchild of William and Sarah Levine. Also, I am the 1st relative named after Aunt Evelyn Mae Levine.

.....The Journey of William and Sarah Levine, from Vilna, Lithuania to Waterville, Maine, is a quintessential and sometimes differently told story.

.....Before I continue with this family history, I want to give you a brief history of why our extended "Levine Family" left their homeland of Lithuania. I should not use the word homeland because the "Jews" of Lithuania, at this time in the 1880s, were living under the rule of " The Imperial Czarist Russian Empire." Most Jews were

living in small villages or as they say in Yiddish...Shtetls. The men were storekeepers, farmers, dairymen, tailors, and Hebraic Scholars; the women maintained the households. These were poor people trying to get by day-by-day. Anti-Semitism was rampant. Jews were being killed in pogroms, women were being raped, land was being stolen from them, and boys and men were being forced into the Russian Army for extended periods of time. There was nothing left for the Jews except their freedom to leave their "Shtetls; so this is what this nomad tribe did. They left Vilna to start new lives in their adopted new home America.

.....The descendants of our common Levine male and female ancestors, had the last names of Levine, Barron, Lowell, Levin, Rosenthal, Shiro, and Wolman. These pioneers were mothers & fathers, sisters & brothers, and cousins; and, in some instances double and triple cousins. They all would find their way to America through the generosity of each family member that came before them. The new "Shtetle" in America would be in " THE NORTH END" of Waterville, Maine. Here these Jewish immigrants would build families, businesses, and their 1st Shul on Kelsey Street. One of these remarkable families would be "The William & Sarah Levine Family."

.....William Levine, in 1883, at the age of 18 and as the eldest child of six children of Alexander Ziskin Levine and

Ada Barron Levine, left his parents and siblings, boarded a ship, and went off to America to pursue his dreams.

.....As soon as he arrived in New York City, he went to work as a peddler, with that retail smile on his face. With a pack on his back and his two young feet, he went about selling clothing, rags, pots and pans. You name it, a peddler sold it! Uncles Ludy & Pacy said this about their Papa: "He was a hard working man. Hours did not mean a thing to him. He never had enough hours in the day. He came up the hard way."

.....After spending about six months in New York, William walked to Boston selling his wares along the way. It took him six months! He stayed in Boston for only two months before trekking through Massachusetts and New Hampshire to his destination of Maine. He sold his merchandise through various parts of the state like Portland, Augusta, Waterville and as far north as Monson, Strong, and Kingsfield. You ask, why did he go to Maine? At the time, Maine was still, very rural and quite different from Boston & New York. William had heard that there were business opportunities through out Maine, the cost of living was less than New York and Boston, and a peddler's license cost less in Maine than in Massachusetts. The license cost \$50 in Maine and twice that in Massachusetts. At some point, while he traveled through Maine, he purchased a peddler's wagon and a

horse; he stayed in Maine for about two to three years, always on the look out for new customers.

.....In 1889, William began his trek back down through Maine to return to Boston; he had cousins living in between the west end and north end of Boston. It is not a fact, but I think he had sent them some money to come to America. Uncles Ludy and Pacy said this: " We brought them over...Our father started everything...He brought a lot of cousins." Eventually, William would help bring all his siblings, except one , and a number of extended family members to America. These siblings were Samuel Levine, Leah Levine Rosenthal, Freda Libby Levine Levine, and Louis "Kalman" Levine; his parents, Alexander Ziskin Levine and Ada Barron Levine, never came to America

.....The cousin, though, who would change his life forever, would be his older 1st cousin, Julius "Tati" Levine. Tati is an endearing Levine Yiddish name for father. William's father, Alexander Ziskin Levine and Julius' father, Aaron Levine, were brothers. The father and mother of Alexander, Aaron, and a brother they also had named Abraham Levine, who stayed in Vilna and one other brother whose name I do not know, are the common Levine ancestors of all the Levine Family members that are present this evening, as well as our cousins who stayed in Vilna, Lithuania, and our other cousins who live in Fall River,

Massachusetts and those in Paris, France.

.....Julius Tati Levine, then living in Boston, had come to this country with his second wife, Rachel Schein Levine, and their children, which included Sarah Ida Levine, Abraham Phillip Levine, Johnny "Dutch" Levine, and his step daughter Annie Schein. The first three children were Julius's children with his first wife, Fanny Trotsky Levine, who had died in Vilna. Julius and Rachel would have two children together by the names of Eva and Lewis Lester Levine.

.....William, as they say had his eye on 17 year old cousin Sarah; he was 24. She was beautiful inside and outside, and was very bright. Some accounts say William knew Sarah in Vilna and some say he did not. What is important here is that these two cousins married, in Boston, on October 18, 1889.

.....After they married, William and Sarah began their journey up through Portland, Augusta, Waterville, and on to Dexter, Maine where they lived for three months. In 1890 Sarah gave birth to her first child, Anna, who would become the first of nine children she would bear in in a twenty-six year period.

.....By leaving Dexter, William and Sarah would solidify the destiny of their family by making their home base, The Elm City, Waterville, Maine. Why did they choose Waterville? William had passed through Waterville, making many

observations while conducting business and staying in this city. Firstly, there were five Jewish families already living in the city; secondly, Waterville was situated in central Maine and this would make it easy for William to travel between southern and northern Maine and make buying trips to Portland and Boston; thirdly, and the most important component, was that he and Sarah saw future business opportunities with the Polish speaking immigrants that lived and worked in Waterville and in the surrounding communities. These people worked in mills and lumber camps all through Maine. William and Sarah's native tongue was Polish and these individuals in many instances did not speak English and trusted this young Jewish couple who sold merchandise to them on credit and spoke their language.

.....By 1891 William and Sarah had lived at three locations in Waterville, before opening their first store, where they lived upstairs, at the corner of Ticonic and Maple Streets. Sarah ran the store selling dry goods and all kinds of notions while William was, still, peddling. We believe the store was just called Levine's. Eventually, he would leave the peddler's road to run the store with his wife Sarah. I wonder if they ever imagined that the store would run for 105 years! William's 1946 obituary in the Waterville Morning Sentinel stated the following: " Mrs. Levine was a great help and an inspiration to him." The Levine siblings always

professed that their "Papa was a hard worker and smart, but Mama was, also, very smart!"

.....Grandma Levine, in my opinion, was a true LADY and a MODERN WOMAN for her times. In today's society she would be called a multi- tasker . She cared for her husband and was his business partner in both Levine's Store and their real estate concerns. She raised eight children, ran a household where she, on a daily basis, cleaned, sewed, cooked, baked, found time for herself in artistic endeavors and additionally, manifested a kindness to all who knew her. My Nana Betty said the following of her loving Mama: Mama never complained; it was not in her nature. She was too busy with what life had to offer."

.....Tonight, as I stand before you, I hope you are all aware of the legacy that Grandpa and Grandma Levine have left us. It is not just our Jewish and American Heritage but a deep sense of family and how best to treat one another as human beings. I want to read a quote from my Mom Sara Lee and my Auntie Tema which reflects the philosophy of Sarah Levine: " Our grandmother Sarah Levine, set the example for our mom, Betty. Treat your spouse, children, parents, siblings, other family members, and all individuals with love, respect, and compassion and you will be treated the same way in return. .

.....If the eight siblings, Ann, Teddy, Frieda, Ludy, Betty,

Pacy, Evelyn, and Bibby, who were the life line of William and Sarah, were with us tonight, they would say the following to each other: Mama and Papa would have enjoyed this celebration of the journey of our family from Vilna, Lithuania to Waterville, Maine.

..... This reunion weekend, which starts tonight, is bringing together not only the descendants of William and Sarah Levine but our extended family. For a family that has been in America for about 125 years, it is remarkable how so many of the generations on all the sides of the family know each other. We Levines are seven generations in America. As we gather together this weekend, please share as many stories as you can with all the generations, so that future generations will never forget where they truly come from. After the reunion, we all go back to our everyday lives, but given today's electronic world, let's stay in touch. I will and I hope you all will too.

.....Thank you for listening....

.....Also, I want to thank cousins Sara Miller Arnon, Wendy Miller, and Julie Miller Soros for organizing this reunion weekend and cousin Ben Arnon for creating The Levine Family Web Site.