

Immigrants in Buffalo

DELLA RUBENSTEIN ADLER

Of her ninety years, Della Rubenstein Adler has spent seventy in Buffalo, N. Y., where she was born in 1876. Her parents, Louis W. and Catherine Mayerberg Rubenstein, were among the earlier East European immigrant Jews in the city, and Della Adler is the sole survivor of nine children, several of whom, her son Selig points out, played an active role in Buffalo Jewish community life. In 1907, Della married Joseph G. Adler, who had emigrated from Bavaria fourteen years earlier and, as one of the strictly Orthodox German Jews who worshipped at Baltimore's Shearith Israel Congregation, was devoted to a far different, far more westernized form of Orthodoxy than his wife had known in Buffalo. Joseph and Della made their home in Baltimore, where Della bore her husband two sons — Selig, now Professor of American History in the State University of New York at Buffalo, and Louis W., who now lives in Miami, Florida. Returning to Buffalo in 1926, after Joseph's death, Della has lived there ever since and, in 1961, entered the Rosa Coplton Home, where she took up writing as a hobby. On August 28, 1964, the Baltimore Jewish Times published her reminiscence of the Shearith Israel Congregation — "The Synagogue That Said 'No!'" — and the editors of the American Jewish Archives take pleasure now in offering their readers her recollections of Jewish life in late-nineteenth-century Buffalo.

A FAMILY ANECDOTE

Father — Louis W. Rubenstein (1849–1898) — was born in Kalet, Suwalki *Gubernia*, Lithuania. In youthful exuberance, he had boasted to a *muzhik*, a peasant working on Grandfather's land, that he would not serve in the Czar's army. No, not he. He was going to America as soon as he was old enough to make the journey, to a country where all men were free, and, better yet, the streets were said to be paved with gold. He was then sixteen years old — a gentle, sensitive lad who had been sent to a nearby larger Jewish community for further Hebrew education.

In the Russia of Czar Alexander II, informing was a lucrative and much encouraged business — so inform the *muzhik* did. Therefore, the Russian secret police came hurriedly in the small hours of the morning to arrest this dangerous boy. Their hearts were evidently not entirely made of stone, for they listened to Grandma's pleas and agreed to wait until daybreak to take him to jail.

When we heard father tell of his ten weeks in prison, the story wrung our childish hearts. There apparently was no trial; he was just put to doing the hardest and most degrading jobs. Father was physically unable to take this and became so ill that he was of no use to the Czar or anyone else. This fact, plus three hundred nice, fat rubles, got him a release by a doctor's decree, and he was sent home to die. But die he did not. Under Grandmother's tender, loving care, he soon became well and strong. Then, indeed, he fled across the *grenetz* — the border — to Germany and made his way eventually to Metz, France, where he knew of the existence of an uncle.

This relative did not seem to want any part of him, or perhaps a boyish pride accounts for his finding himself, hopeless and penniless, on the streets of Metz. Some kindly soul helped him buy a glazier's kit and taught him a skill, then very much in demand by householders. In any case, he managed to get by and earned enough money to pay for his fare across the Atlantic. Somewhere on the way he must have lived in England, for I well remember his decided British accent, albeit his use of the vernacular was far from perfect. In all probability, the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War speeded his resolution to leave the Old World, for he landed in America in 1870 shortly after the beginning of that war. The only relic of his French sojourn was a French-translated *mahzor*, a holyday prayer book.

Father often told this poignant little story to his children and always ended with, "It is all over now; let us be grateful and happy that we are in our own, wonderful country."

SIX SILVER SPOONS

Grandfather — Jacob H. Mayerberg — came to this country in 1867, from a small place in Lithuania called Volkovisk. His original

mission was a business one, and he expected to return. Destiny decided otherwise.

He had heard that the U. S. A., especially New York City, was perishing from a need for *seforim* — Hebrew books of learning. So, the idea was to come here with a stock of books, sell them at a good profit, and return.

Poor Grandfather! On the way over, every book — plus all else he possessed — was stolen, and he arrived in Castle Garden, destitute.

He did what he was totally unequipped for — physically and by nature — he peddled. What with, I do not know, but I do know he peddled through New York State in deep, drifted snow and icy winds and finally reached Buffalo and settled down as a *melamed*, a Hebrew teacher. The late Willard Saperston was one of his *talmidim*, his students. He thus eked out a pathetic living in bleak, dreary surroundings, and there Grandmother Hennie and their four children found him when they arrived in this country some three years later.

Grandma's comment on first seeing him was, "Yankov Hirsch, what happened to you? In three years you have become an old man." He was then forty-seven years old.

Grandmother was not one just to sit and do nothing. Her first effort was to find respectable living quarters. To pay the rent, she sold her most valuable possession, six silver spoons. The day came when there was no money to pay another month's rent, and Yankov Hirsch and Hennie assumed a "the Lord will provide" attitude; and the Lord, blessed be He, did provide.

Came a knock on their door, one fine day. A man of friendly mien stood there and asked — did they have one large or two small rooms to rent to six men who peddled in the country and came home just for *shabbes* [the Sabbath]? There were five married men whose wives were awaiting the necessary *Schiffskarten* to come to America, and there was one twenty-one year-old unmarried youngster who was being petted and spoiled by the older men. Each Thursday, one of the six came home to cook for *Shabbes*. The other five came home on Friday.

The Mayerbergs could, and did, rent them rooms, and this miraculously solved the rent problem for them, until they could

scramble to their feet. The single man, Louis Rubenstein, married the eldest daughter of the Mayerbergs, Kate — Chayah — and they became my parents.

This all happened in the very long ago. Both the Mayerbergs and my parents prospered in a very modest way, and thereafter needed no crutch.

Today, I am the last living member of the Louis Rubenstein family, and the memory of the six silver spoons still lingers.

JULY 4TH, 1871

In the long ago, the Fourth of July was a most wonderful day for a child. One felt so warmly patriotic with the bands blaring out martial music, the parades going smartly by, the outdoor stands on almost every street corner, and the many visitors; most of the countryside came to help celebrate. All in all, it was a day of days, one to be looked forward to for a whole year. Then, the thriftiest and most frugal parents opened the family purse for the fireworks which were the highlight of the big day. There were, first of all, the ear-shattering firecrackers, big and little, sky rockets of dazzling beauty, pin wheels, and many other kinds to thrill us. Of course, there was the magnificent civic display in the parks and public places, but I remember best the individual fireworks at each doorstep. And then the joy of the corner stands where one could purchase rock candy in three colors — not only the plain yellow kind — licorice drops and taffies in different colors, and lemonade and sandwiches.

Sandwiches — that brings me to my story. Grandfather Mayerberg's family had arrived in Buffalo from the old country just four months before. There were six in the family, and there was evidently a scramble to reach some sort of stability. Kindly neighbors of their own faith told them that quite a bit of money could be made by opening a food stand on the Fourth. In other words, a stand to dispense sandwiches and lemonade. What kind of sandwiches? Why, *ham*, of course.

Kate, the eldest of the Mayerberg children, was elected to tend the stand. She must have had understandable objections to the making

and sale of ham sandwiches, whether to Jew or Gentile, but the neighbors pooh-poohed her objections and those of her parents and finally convinced them to go ahead. Kate was a bright, alert, energetic girl; she had no business ability, but was aware of the need and went ahead with her project. The sandwiches were made and packed in a bushel basket (I'm sure without benefit of individual wrapping), the lemonade all stirred up in a new wash tub, and Kate was ready to haul her merchandise to Main Street, where a crude stand was set up. All went well so far, with everything neatly arranged on the stand and Kate all ready in a clean gingham dress and white apron.

Then, and it was still very early in the morning, the sun suddenly clouded over and the rain came. In buckets it came down — such a rain as hadn't been known since the time of Noah. The sandwiches were reduced to a pulp, the lemonade became rainwater, and Kate was drenched to the skin. There was nothing left to do but gather up the wreckage and run home, and that's what Kate did.

She found her father unconcernedly smoking his pipe — that was women's business, not his — but Mother Mayerberg wept and wailed and wrung her hands. Such a disaster — all that wasted money. But Kate did not weep or wail or wring her hands. No, sir, she was alive and well, and what if a few dollars were gone? Tomorrow will be another day and tomorrow will bring new opportunities to replace the lost money. She danced around the room and would not let her mother weep.

Knowing my good, pious mother who was Kate, I suspect that deep down in her heart she was thankful to the Almighty for keeping her from the mortal sin of selling *ham* sandwiches.

She lived to be nearly ninety-one and never forgot that memorable day — July 4th, 1871.

THE EARLY BALLABATTIM OF BUFFALO

Thoughts come to me of my young days and the men I used to know, most of them members of the then young Clinton Street *shul*, Congregation Beth Jacob. This *shul* was the brainchild of Grandfather Mayerberg, who needed a place to worship in his own right-

eous, traditional way. He needed to be abetted by his own type and wanted no hindrance, either to his traditionalism or in the worship rite. So, aided by his son-in-law, my father Louis, they set out ambitiously enough to build the *shul*, which flourished and became well-known in later years as a bulwark of traditional Orthodoxy.

It was a goal for *meshulahim* [itinerant fundraisers], *hazzanim* [cantors], an outstanding *maggid* [preacher] now and then, and altogether a charity target. Here the pleas for *yeshivot*, orphan asylums, homes for the aged, Jerusalem charities, and so on, were heeded and supported to the best ability of the members, none of whom had much of worldly goods. If misfortune befell, such as the loss of a peddler's horse which was indeed a calamity, or a dowry was needed to marry off a daughter, a special meeting was called, and therewith the horse or dowry was provided by contributors, each as he could give. In the case of the horse, this was also a sort of mutual insurance, as no one knew when his horse might be the next to fall. This seems like true charity and was practiced wholeheartedly by this group of men who had so little, yet could always spare a little.

Perhaps the most affluent one was Joseph — Yossel — Saperston, who was a joiner, either for shuls or organizations, and a flitterer — here awhile, there awhile, but, when there, was a prominent member, had a say-so and a following. He had come to Buffalo before the other members and was well-established in a fine home with his wife, Shamie, and their large family.

Grandfather Mayerberg and my father were great friends and did things together, including the building of the *shul* and holding up the righteous pillars to keep a traditionally Orthodox congregation in the way of upright Lithuanian *mitnagdim* [non-mystics].

I do not remember all of the original members, but there was Sholem Cohn, who later became father's business partner. At that early time, he plodded through the world, driving his old white horse till midnight as his day began at noon, scrupulously saving every spare penny until he became quite a wealthy man. He was honorable to a degree, a religious man but dour — I think I never saw him smile. Not a colorful man, but he did well enough to help run the *shul*.

Then there was Harris Cohen — a quiet, unobtrusive, fine little man whose ayes and nays were also valuable. He, who died tragically at an early age, lived with his wife Rachel a block away from the *shul* and raised a large family of well-doing people — one son, Dr. J. Y. Cohen, a prominent physician here; the late Frank L., a road builder; and a daughter, Etta, a high school English teacher.

Schmerl Brumberg, the brother-in-law of Harris Cohen, was an individualist and something of a nonconformist — in theory, if not in practice — but evidently he did not succeed in shaking the roots of the *shul*. It stayed steadfast despite Schmerl. He, too, was a scrupulously honest man. The story was that, when Schmerl's day went well, the family ate, and when it didn't, they subsisted. He and his very good, but subservient wife Maryasha raised a fine family, three of whom were physicians of repute.

Levine, the oil man, as he was called, peddled kerosene oil from a truck, and I remember him well. A fine, thoughtful man, he often stopped at our house for a cup of coffee on the day he delivered the oil to fill our five or six lamps. The chore of filling these lamps, polishing the glass globes till they shone, and wiping off the surplus smelly oil was a burdensome job that, in itself, would make me remember Levine, the oil man. But I liked him for himself. He inspired me with his honesty, integrity, and faith.

Then there was Uncle David Shepsel Gottlieb, who really had the attributes of a successful man and never, never was. He was a short, squat man with a nice face and humorous, twinkling eyes, had a fine Hebrew background, was a well-known lay hazzan as he possessed a beautiful voice, and also had a repertoire of songs which no one could sing as he did. I still remember them. I also remember his daily pilgrimage to our house from *shul* and the daily *schmapps* he and my father took from a brown crockery jug which stood behind the pantry door. No fancy labeled bottles in those days — when the jug was empty, the liquor delivery man filled it.

There was also one S. Cohen, known as Schmuley der Yoven, a man of firm convictions which he made no attempt to conceal. Far from polished, but a good and honorable man, he ran a peddlers' supply store, where the *ballabattim* [synagogal pillars] congregated to argue "pro and con" about what they wanted and what they didn't

want. His wife Fagie was a character, no match for witty and outgoing Schmuel. One of their descendants is a brilliant lawyer.

I must not leave Israel Friedlander out. He had ideas on every subject — some good, some not so good, but all expressed in a loud, booming, convincing voice. He was a natural orator, and on each and every occasion, he aired his talent. He and his wife Hadassah lived a turbulent life. They had a large family, one of whom is a college professor. I believe none married, and the Israel Friedlander dynasty is ended.

Later, there was one member who owned a horse by the name of Chaim. Chaim was a knowledgeable animal — on *hol ha-moed Pesach*, the intervening days of Passover, Chaim trotted smartly by the saloons which his owner regularly, if unsteadily, patronized on weekdays. At these times, Chaim came to a full stop of his own accord. This gentleman wasn't the only one who had a weakness for the bottle. There was Abram Salinski, the Jewish town drunkard, whose poor wife Mindel, a wonderfully good soul, spent most of her time trying to sober him up as unobtrusively as possible. Not a word of complaint, but we all knew it. They raised a large family in dire, but immaculate poverty. The children all went to work at an early age and had no schooling; nevertheless, all of them possessed an elegance of bearing, a surprisingly fine diction, and a dignity all their own. A relative was a very well-known, highly successful English teacher in the high school.

In the category of inebriates, I cannot omit Chaikel, the carpenter. He really was superior in mind and wit, also in his chosen field. A humorist and philosopher, a sort of Jewish Will Rogers, yet he often had to be dragged out of one saloon after another. He did many a little job to the exacting specifications of my mother — from a just-so rolling pin to a folding table to be set by the then tiny sink as an aid in dishwashing. This table had two fitted boards, one for dairy dishes and one for meat — it was a real convenience. Later Chaikel was the architect and builder of our North Division Street home, which had to be remodeled after father's untimely death when mother had to pull the reins tight.

And now comes Uncle Saul Rubenstein, who lived to be very old and was so well-known on William Street after the influx of the

90's and later. There was scarcely a refugee family from the Old World's tyranny who did not feel the sympathetic, philanthropic touch of Saul Rubenstein and his son Emil H., who so ably carried on. Emil it was who had the proper contacts, so the people here would be assured that their scraped-up, hardearned money would reach father, mother, wife, and so on, in American dollars of full value. Then they engaged in the *Schiffskarten* business on the installment plan — so much down and, thereafter, weekly payments to speed the bringing over of relatives from the hell that was theirs. This was philanthropy of a high and unusual order and I pay tribute to the memory of Uncle Saul, and I honor my cousin Emil for his untiring zeal. In his later years, this fine old man's philanthropy took the turn of selling tickets for charity — it mattered not what kind of charity, as long as it was a ticket and needed to be sold, he was there to do it. He had his "customers," traveled many miles to reach them, was always warmly welcomed, had his hearing — and the tickets were sold. The Rosa Coplon Home was one of his pets — he did very much for it and his efforts were appreciated and are remembered. My son, Selig, in his book, *From Ararat to Suburbia*, wrote of Uncle Saul as an earthy man and he was — he loved the outdoors, the growing of things, animals, especially horses. He once shocked his wife almost unconscious by bringing a foal into the living room. He smiled much, loved a game of cards, talked with everyone and everyone talked with him — he was a character and a well-beloved one.

These were all the early men of the Clinton Street *shul* — it served its purpose well for many years until the changing neighborhood closed its doors and caused its abandonment. It finally was purchased by the city and demolished to make room for a public playground. A worthy offshoot of the Congregation Beth Jacob *shul* is the Elmwood Avenue Congregation Beth Abraham, which is a nice little building maintained in fine shape by a few dedicated men under the devoted, unselfish leadership of Joseph A. Sapowitch, once president of the National Bureau of Jewish Education. It is rigidly Orthodox in the tradition of Beth Jacob and today is the only Orthodox *shul* on the East or West sides. May it ever prosper!