
American Jewish Personalities

Herman J. Levine, Manager of the Jewish Agricultural Society

Ruth J. Frankenstein

My dad was Herman J. Levine (1894–1985), who became the manager of the Jewish Agricultural Society (JAS), a Baron de Hirsch Fund organization, after serving for many years as its Ellenville, New York, branch manager and then as head of its Farm Loan and Settlement Department. The purpose of the Fund, as stated in 1891 by Baron de Hirsch, was

to make human beings capable of becoming useful members of Society. . . . What I desire to accomplish . . . and that for which I am ready to stake my wealth and my intellectual powers, is to give a portion of my companions in faith the possibility of finding a new existence primarily as farmers, and also as handicraftsman, in those lands where the laws and religious tolerance permit them to carry on the struggle for existence as noble and responsible subjects of a humane government.

My dad, in accepting this charge in 1919, when he began to work for the JAS, devoted almost his entire “professional career,” most of his waking hours, to the lives of the Jewish farm family and to representing American Jewry in small-town and rural America, particularly in New York and New Jersey. He traveled to other parts of the country, what seemed like a million miles, visiting every section of the country where Jewish farmers were found. He was the “outpost” in the Catskills for many of the national Jewish organizations, working closely with the UJA (United Jewish Appeal), the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the National Refugee Service, the National Council of Jewish Women, the American Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee, and the synagogue movements as well as the various federal, state, county, and local governmental agencies—the Department of Agriculture, the Federal Land Bank, the Rural Electrification Department, the county agents, the Farm Bureau.



*Ruth J. Frankenstein outside the office of the
Jewish Agricultural Society, Ellenville, New York.*

(Courtesy of Ruth J. Frankenstein)

In a sense my dad was his own social and civic agency, human relations and community organization mediation board. Our office/house, its two parts separated by a sliding door, which provided passageway many times during the day, sharing the same phone, was a microcosm of what went on in rural communal life. Although his primary focus was on the Jewish farmer, helping prospective farmers locate and finance farms, advising farmers on technical and scientific matters, such as the growing and marketing of crops, chlorination, irrigation and sanitation, the breeding and raising of livestock and poultry, and other problems on the farm, no communal need or activity was outside his interest; he considered it within the purview of his work. He felt the responsibility to pursue these interests in the course of his daily activity. It was perhaps this city boy, in his later years as my father, who gave me the deep feeling for all growing things, the appreciation and respect for nature and its wonders, the poignant sense of morality, responsibility, and social justice, which has remained with me throughout life.

Memories of a Rural Childhood

We grew all kinds of vegetables and flowers, enjoyed picking and eating cabbage, fresh sweet corn, asparagus, beans, cucumbers, lettuce, tomatoes, grapes, strawberries in season from our garden, and adorning our house with arrangements of petunias, gladioli, dahlias, peonies, irises, and an assortment of annuals and perennials from our yard. We picked all kinds of berries, including blueberries, blackberries, currants, elderberries, strawberries, and grapes for preserves, jams, and wine. We tapped our maple trees to collect sap for syrup. We filled our cold cellar for the winter. Freezing as a process to preserve fruits and vegetables had not yet come into being. When we raised capons for home consumption, I temporarily became a vegetarian—I could not eat something that had grown up in our yard. At one point my dad wanted to bring home a goat for milk, but my mother vetoed it.

Growing up in the country afforded us the freedom and peace of going into the woods after school, getting to know the wildflowers—violets, dogwood, milkweed, pussywillows, trillium, mountain laurel, jack-in-the-pulpit, trailing arbutis, rhododendron. Many an after-



Herman J. Levine
(1894-1985)

(Courtesy of Ruth J. Frankenstein)

noon we spent fascinated by little creatures—lizards, toads, frogs, worms, snakes, and bugs. We learned to recognize the birds—orioles, cardinals, sparrows, blackbirds, bluebirds, blue jays, crows, hummingbirds, robins by their colors, their song, the color of their eggs, and the shape of their nests. We identified the trees by their bark and their leaves.

In growing up we walked with our milk pails to a local farm to get farm-rich milk. There the barn was so clean and the cows were scrubbed down. When pasteurization came into effect, I could not understand how it was an improvement, a protection, since the new dairy seemed dirty. But that was the law. It was interesting to me that although I had been away from the country for many years, when I returned recently from the South, my remembrances quickly returned. It affirmed my belief that when something is learned early in life it is stored and can be reawakened.

Early on my father included his children in national concerns of social significance. In junior high and high school I wrote on the plight of the sharecropper, on union organization, on social work—"The American Canard" and "A Blot on the American Escutcheon" were two of the titles. In ancient history I challenged the textbook's interpretation and my teacher's story of the Crusades, telling of the pillaging, killings, and oppression by the Crusaders and their lack of "nobility." In high school I took on the American Legion and Russell Sage College, challenging them for not having any "Negroes," as blacks were then called with respect, at the American Legion's Girl State, its first seminar on democracy. Although I did not know until later, the American Legion in Ulster County had objected to my selection as their representative and had pressured the judges from the county school system to change their selection. The judges refused to rescind their decision, and I went. (My father had been a Legionnaire but that did not inhibit the Legion's opposition.) This was my civil rights movement in about 1936, reflecting the ideas inculcated early in life.

My dad was available every day to his people and often said he needed no vacation, much to my mother's chagrin and unhappiness. On a Sunday or in the evening when the days were long, he often packed one or all of us and my mother in his car to be off to visit some farmers. There were times when we would accompany him on longer trips to see the orchards in Cayuga County near Ithaca, the dairy and

chicken farms around Binghamton, the chicken farms in New Jersey, the cranberry bogs in Massachusetts, a chinchilla farm in western Massachusetts, a mink farm, a farmer who raised turkeys, a celery farm in the mucklands of rural upstate New York. I used to say I knew the barns at Grossinger's but never the hotels. On these visits we were always welcomed, but as children we behaved well, glad to be along but aware that we were not to intrude on my dad's purpose and business. Nonetheless, the atmosphere seeped in and became part of us.

We shared my father with his work, coming to know hundreds of farm families and they us. We shared in their joys and sorrows, and I was privy to many intimate problems confronting them. It was my father's dream and my ambition to be a social worker, professionally trained, to work among Jewish farm families to complement his work. Although it never came to pass, those early experiences enabled me to develop a capacity to be related to other human beings and a sensitivity, that was like a finely tuned instrument, to understand others, their needs and their pain. As a "Levine girl," second oldest of Herman J. Levine's four daughters, my birth came with all the privileges and responsibilities—sometimes unspoken but nonetheless there—inherent in my birthright. (I came at no cost. The doctor who delivered me refused his usual \$65 fee and sent my dad home with a bushel of vegetables he had grown.)

From Ellenville to New York City

The Ellenville office of the JAS was closed in 1945. Our office/house was sold to the synagogue next door at a price they could manage. The sanitation exhibit in the yard was dismantled; the sprawling maple was cut down, and our garden replaced by the Joseph Slutsky Community Center in memory of Joe Slutsky of Nevele Hotel fame. Our barn, in which we had played house and kept pigeons, and which had horse stalls, was demolished, but the weathervane was saved and is perched to this day on top of the house now occupied by the rabbi, which had been our home. Many years after leaving Ellenville, when the synagogue was moved across the street, where the hospital had been, my dad addressed Congregation Ezrath Israel at its dedication ceremony. He returned to Ellenville, greeted as if he were an elder statesman.

My dad was transferred to New York City in 1945. The reason given was that the farmers no longer needed his presence, advice, guidance, and protection so close at hand. They had grown to be on their own. This was an upheaval in my dad's life, a blow couched as a promotion, first to head up the Loan and Settlement Department and then as manager of the JAS. At the time of his departure some three hundred people came together at the Hotel Brickman in Fallsburg, New York, in a tremendous outpouring of affection, support, and recognition of my dad and his contributions. He was presented with a bound volume symbolic of his life and work, which was treasured by him. Included in it was a testimonial statement, the signatures of the hundreds and hundreds of people who felt their lives had been touched and helped by him, collages of pictures and articles highlighting his various activities. Surrounded by those he loved and those who loved him at this farewell, he was moved to tears, as were many others.

Bertye Lefkowitz, my dad's loyal and devoted secretary, left her parents and the homestead to join my father as head of the Farm Employment Department in New York. She never married and probably idealized my dad. She added a spark to our lives when we were children; she always seemed young and spunky, dressed us up in her high-heel shoes, lipstick, and earrings—somewhat too risqué, we thought—to play house. She was fun and a welcomed confidante. At times when a farmer came to the office with a pungent odor of manure, she escaped through the sliding door to seek refuge in our house, but she had a special stake in the success of the farmers and the work of the Jewish Agricultural Society—and a devotion to my dad.

In New York my dad felt keenly the loss of his identity and a fear of involving himself in organizations in which he had participated previously. He saw himself as a man of limited means in Manhattan, loaded down with heavy financial responsibilities, unable to contribute financially in the manner of New York philanthropy. However, he did go as a guest to a dinner honoring Chaim Weizmann, first president of Israel, at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. Without pretense and not interested in fashion, he wore his best, a brown-tweed Rogers Peet suit, as one of many hundreds who came out on that very special occasion. Everyone else wore their best too—tuxedos. It did not occur to my father that formal attire was the appropriate dress; he stayed undaunted. In Ellenville my dad had reveled in being a big fish in a small pond,

and now he felt like a needle in a haystack. He undertook a new endeavor with my mother's encouragement. He enrolled in law school, since the philosophy of the law had always fascinated him, going evenings after a day's work. It was quite an experience to watch him study surrounded by men and women half his age.

My dad had been quite alone in his objection when the decision came down that the Ellenville office was closing. Although he had opportunities to be backed in different businesses, at fifty-one years of age he was not ready to leave his life work to begin again.

My younger sisters, who were still at home, wanted to move to New York, although they had never lived in any other house, let alone any other community. Until then our relationship to New York had consisted of seasonal shopping trips—45 cents for a school dress and 89 cents for a good dress—visiting the “educational” sites, having our eyes examined and our teeth fixed, visiting my grandparents and mother's friends. It had been a treat to eat at the Horn and Hardart cafeteria on 14th Street not far from the New York office of the JAS and riding on the subway. In the 1940s my parents would go to New York for an evening with the Koopermans, their most intimate friends, for a special event, the Broadway theater, a concert or a lecture, and we braved snow and ice to get through, primarily at my mother's instigation.

By the mid-forties, when the Ellenville office was to close, my mother felt it was time to leave there, since she and my father had been attacked and deeply hurt by some Gentile friends when my father had cast the additional vote, not the deciding vote, to fire the principal of our school, who was considered inept. No one else received such calls and confrontations, to our knowledge. The previous year, much to my mother's consternation and mine, my father had refused to cast the deciding vote, and the principal remained. My dad was afraid of what the reverberations in the community might be if he voted not to renew the principal's contract, feeling a special responsibility as a Jew to other Jews in a predominantly Gentile community.

The Demise of the Family Farm

This painful and disillusioning experience did not diminish the value and meaning of the precious years nor the many people who received

my dad warmly and ecstatically—"It is a holiday," declared one of the farmers, a refugee from Hitler's Germany, when he saw us. There were sad times too—families during the depression living in chicken coops after a fire destroyed the farmhouse; farmers threatened with foreclosure, unable to meet the mortgages, and my dad trying to forestall the loss, negotiating third mortgages with little collateral. Some farms were boarded up and abandoned; others were sold at auction. During the depression, crops grown lay wasting, unprofitable to market, because prices were too low. Dreams were shattered. Of course, in recent decades, the family farm has come to be a thing of the past—history—a way of life too costly, replaced by agribusiness. The family farm could no longer compete with the contract farms. Gone are many of the small dairy farms, vegetable farms, chicken farms, and orchards—many of which had boarders and roomers to supplement income in the summer—that used to dot the countryside and prosper. For the most part, people are not looking to become farmers.

The children of the farm, for the most part, have gone on to other things except for the few who became large dairy farmers, sometimes raising and harvesting their own grain, or large poultry farmers involved in breeding, egg production, and marketing. Max Yasgur, of Bethel, New York, was a second-generation farmer. His vision extended beyond the family farm, and the reality became a large herd of registered Holstein cows, acreage to grow his feed and fodder, his own pasteurizing plant. His place will go down in history—the Woodstock Music Festival was held there. Then there were others, Joe Brill, my older sister's classmate, a third-generation dairyman, the Gibber brothers, the Jaffee brothers, Max Brender, to name some. Abe Jaffee wrote my father in 1982, "Hearing from you reminds me of the very important role you played in helping Jewish farmers make a better living on their farms and the part you played in helping the cooperative get started and grow. . . . I am proud and happy to have been associated with you in the cooperative movement." Some farmlands close to the towns and cities became "too valuable" to farm—were bought up for development—the potato farms of Long Island, farmland in Florida and elsewhere disappeared to make way for suburbia, airports, industry, and homes.

New opportunities opened up after the Second World War. I remember several farmers who expanded their father's farm, renting

neighboring lands to grow sweet corn. After becoming one of the largest sweet corn growers in New York they converted one of the barns into an antenna factory. They became Channel Masters and subsequently sold out to a large conglomerate. One brother, my classmate, became a congressman. (Years past they had lived on a dirt road up in Ulster Heights, frequently so impassable in winter that for that and other reasons the only daughter lived with us during the school year.)

The G.I. Bill and a decrease in discrimination against Jews brought an easing in college admissions for Jews; the expansion of the industrial economy with concomitant job and business openings, employment in federal agencies, and our increased mobility made for an exodus from rural America of many young people to eventual settlement in the neighboring towns, large cities, and suburbia. In more recent years the poor farm conditions hastened the decline of the family farm. However, the early experiences of life on the farm are indelibly etched on the minds of those who lived it. I have felt my own excitement and kinship when I have met someone from “the country,” although I have been away from Ellenville since 1945. There is a bond that brings us together, confirming the validity in the importance of early childhood experiences and their influences in later life.

My Dad's Early Years

Who could have foreseen that Herman J. Levine would become the man he did? Outwardly his life seemed to begin very differently. Born in Volkovisk, Russia, he was brought from Europe to the streets of New Brunswick, New Jersey, as an infant with a younger brother and sister, and was reared by parents of meager means and formal education but steeped in the Jewish teachings and tradition—strictly Orthodox; his grandfather, Wolfe Levine, was a founder in 1889 of Congregation Ahavas Achim, his father, Benjamin Levine, a “pack peddler” and a “merchant.” My dad, the oldest of ten children, became a man with a broader vision, achieving the American dream, with a mission to contribute to the community in which he lived while still retaining a strong identity as a Jew. As a boy he peddled oranges from a hand basket, and fruits and vegetables from a wagon; in high school he worked as a grocery clerk. He put in a stint as the attendant at the mikvah and as a farmhand.

It was from Burnet Street in New Brunswick, where many Jews from Volkovisk had settled in the “usual” businesses, giving each other support and friendship in this strange new land as they eked out a meager livelihood, that my dad “climbed the mountain” to higher education and the outside world. On a scholarship and working, my dad went to Rutgers University, a land grant college, graduating as an agriculturist in 1915. He was one of a handful of Jews at the university. Dr. Selman Waksman, discoverer of streptomycin, was his classmate and lifelong friend, as was Dr. Joffee, an agronomist at Rutgers, and Arthur Kuntz. These boys stuck together, protecting each other and arranging to be excused from what had been compulsory chapel attendance. (Most colleges and universities were under religious auspices.) Dr. Jacob G. Lipman of Rutgers was my dad’s mentor. Upon graduation my dad worked as an assistant in vegetable research at Rutgers toward an advanced degree. Perhaps this was the beginning of the unfolding of H.J., as he was affectionately called by his friends.

World War I, in which he enlisted, took him to Europe—France and Italy. He became a master sergeant. He perfected French, which he enjoyed speaking, and learned to blow the bugle for “wake up” time, which years later he used in fun to signal his children to breakfast. He also knew Yiddish, Hebrew, and German. His knowledge of French was helpful when I was in high school. My parents divided responsibilities in helping their children with school—my father’s fields were science, math, French, and current events; my mother’s forté was English, literature and composition, oh yes, and the arts! Both my parents instilled in their children the importance of education. My dad’s presents to me were always books. He surrounded himself with newspapers and magazines.

My dad pitched in with the rearing of his four daughters, Helen Eve, Esther Belle, Lenore Sara, and me. We saw him more than other children could see their fathers, because he was there. We even had our main meal at noon as a family. After supper at 6:45 we listened to Lowell Thomas give the news on the radio, with my father frequently washing the dishes, and my older sister and I drying the dishes and cleaning up the kitchen, unless she escaped to the bathroom. We then scattered to our various activities—my folks to meetings, and the children to do homework. We frequently reassembled at the end of the evening in the kitchen, sometimes with my parents’ friends, particu-

larly Ethel and Joe Kooperman, to discuss the evening's happenings. This was in Ellenville.

Years later, when I was working in New York, I commented to my colleagues how sad it was to see so many men locked into jobs they disliked—leaving home at daybreak to return at night after their children were asleep. Our lives were protected, removed from the pressures and struggles confronting many folks. Even poverty in the country seemed less stark and harsh. People had their piece of land on which to grow food, raise a few cows and a flock of chickens, flowers that would bloom, and clean, fresh air to breathe. Indeed there were those in the 1920s and 1930s who resettled in the “mountains” from the cities to escape the sweatshops, arrest tuberculosis, and regain their health and strength. I have a nostalgic feeling for “the country,” although I cannot go back from where I came—it exists mainly in memory and within the lives of those who lived it.

My dad was sought out for many things—his office and our home were like one—a hub of activity. People from all walks of life were always there for all sorts of purposes. Very early in life we were involved in his many and diverse undertakings, expressing ourselves on all kinds of subjects, probably beyond our years. He could be involved in the concern of a parent whose daughter was in love with a young farmer who had been divorced, with a farm family whose son had gotten into difficulty with the law, helping a qualified person get into college or get a job, with mediating disputes between partners on a farm, with problems of finance and health confronting a farm family. My father saw settling on a farm as a family affair. He interviewed wives as well as husbands. He used to say he looked at the woman's hands to see if they would be good for milking and her nails to see if they had to be manicured. He believed that a woman's attitude, her readiness to work hard, endure hardships, and live far away from family in new surroundings greatly influenced the family's success on the farm.

Refugees and Discrimination

I remember some of the refugees who passed through the doors of the JAS in Ellenville. At first the refugees from Europe in the mid-1930s, some former cattle dealers, purchased large dairy farms, some former

estates, near Binghamton and Chatham, bringing from Europe full households of massive furniture; one even brought household help. Of course many were of more modest means—some settled on poultry farms in the New Jersey area; some combined farming with boarders and roomers, campers, and/or jobs in the village. A strange, vivid picture also returns to me—that of a young man from Germany, here on a tourist visa, who came to talk to my dad about farming and I overheard him saying, “It is not so bad in Germany. So I wear a yellow star, but I am driven in a limousine to and from work each day.” Not much later we met some of those who survived concentration camps and knew too well how bad it could be. They were broken in spirit, broken in health, numbers tattooed on their arms, without money and often the only survivors of family and friends. They came hungry to start a new life but were haunted by memories of all kinds of atrocities. My dad worked closely with many organizations to make possible the settlement and survival of these refugees as farmers. Dad also scurried around to get people to sign affidavits to bring other refugees to these shores, guaranteeing that they would not become public charges. Immigration policies were very stringent, cruel, and it was difficult to gain entry to this country.

My dad made us a part of his activities. He spearheaded all kinds of campaigns for local fund drives—from hospital needs to the UJA to making calls and running cars to “get out the vote.” In the 1930s it could have been to elect a Gentile supervisor who promised to appoint a Jewish teacher to a position in a one-room schoolhouse, with a potbellied stove for heat, housing a few children of different ages, to my father’s election for the school board or to be a village trustee, because unlike others he usually had opposition, or to campaigns for the election of county, state, and national officials. At one point he was a delegate to the state Republican convention, although politically he was “liberal.”

It is hard to visualize that in those years, prior to my dad, Ellenville did not have a Jewish teacher; none would ever be referred by the teachers’ agencies in New York; there were signs along Route 17 and other roads which read “Christian community” or “Restricted”; colleges had known severe quotas excluding qualified Jewish students from admission. No Jews worked in local banks, few if any in the utility companies, gas, electric, and telephone. At one point, in the

1940s, when Mount Kisco, a wealthy community in Westchester County, New York, was threatening to rule against a settlement of Lubavitcher Jews who had purchased an estate, it was my father, through the JAS and Mrs. Harrison Salisbury, the wife of the noted newspaperman, a Gentile, who interceded, with my dad giving guidance and direction to these settlers, who had come from Czechoslovakia, to mitigate the town's complaints and outrage.

My father had his own "affirmative action" program, fighting against discrimination and for the opening of opportunities to all qualified people. Before he left Ellenville he had encouraged others to participate actively in the community and groomed some for elective positions. He left his mark, and the scene today is quite different. He assigned himself the responsibility of being a good will ambassador to the Jews and the broader community, to the farmers and townspeople.

Expressions of anti-Semitism were not uncommon and needed to be dealt with. Jews were strangers to many Christians in the 1920s and 1930s, even into the 1940s. We were looked upon with suspicion, as a threat, as Christ-killers. There was not only discrimination but also virulent expressions of prejudice, burning crosses being thrown on the properties of Jews and "Jew lovers."

My dad fought against and succeeded in eliminating invocations of Christ at school and public meetings and also organized interfaith activities. We often had local ministers observe the holidays with us. I remember one Gentile family who served my parents and themselves kosher meat and no dairy out of respect when my parents ate in their home, and regular fare to their Gentile guests at the same dinner. I remember, too, the night in 1939 when Dr. Robert Searles of the Union Theological Seminary, a friend and classmate of my dad's at Rutgers, delivered the commencement address at the high school. Some people walked out because his speech was "too radical"—he spoke about brotherhood and goodwill.

My dad pioneered and championed many things, and his name is inextricably associated with the Jewish agricultural movement. Although his name may not be identified with other things, he made his imprint on the Jewish families who lived on the farms and the people in the small communities in which he worked—Jews and Gentiles.

H. J. Levine is gone now. His life came to an end in 1985, but his legacy lives on. He sprang from what seemed like humble beginnings,

a narrow and meager source, and moved to a life that widened and deepened in interest, responsibility, accomplishment, and influence. His life touched the lives of thousands of different people in different ways. He lived the American dream, wanted and helped others to achieve that dream too. Some of his work is identifiable but much has been lost to become an integral part of other people's lives, to be passed on to future generations. However, it is the substance of the contributions that gives it meaning, importance, and satisfaction, not the honors and medals bestowed. That was my dad, Herman J. Levine, among many things, manager of the Jewish Agricultural Society.

Ruth J. Frankenstein, Ph.D., is a marriage and family therapist. She would like to acknowledge the lasting influence of her husband, Jack, of blessed memory, who "believed in me and my capabilities, encouraged me to spread my wings, opened new vistas."