

The *Maine* Point: Strategies For Transmitting Jewishness L'dor Vador

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When my grandmother was a little girl, she would hop up onto the counter in her uncle's candy store and lick kosher lollipops until her tongue turned blue. She would listen intently, blue raspberry Dum Dum in hand, to the stories that her uncle would tell about their family's Jewish traditions, about their Fourth of Julys on the lake, and about their collective commitment both to Moses *and* Uncle Sam. My grandmother grew up in Waterville, Maine, and for her, Jewishness was seamlessly weaved into the fabric of an otherwise very American upbringing.

While this anecdote may not be universally representative of the Jewish experience in Maine in the 20th century, it is indeed exemplary of a common commitment to the preservation of Jewishness in a larger American context. This essay seeks to reflect this Maine Jewish experience from the perspective of three different families, each of which was successful in transmitting Jewishness to the next generation. First, I will discuss Rebecca Bernstein's childhood growing up in Portland with two religiously observant immigrant parents. Secondly, I will explore Susman Russakoff's experience living in Skowhegan as an adult with his wife and two immigrant parents. Finally, I will uncover my own family's history and their deeply rooted connection to Maine Jewishness. These families all came to Maine for different reasons, and each one used different cultural strategies to achieve their common goal; however, these stories come together to form a collective history that speaks to the success that can *only* be born from a true commitment to American Jewishness.

Rebecca Thurman Bernstein: Jewish Life in Portland

Rebecca Thurman Bernstein was the daughter of a first generation Eastern European Jewish immigrant, Jacob Thurman. Thurman came to the United States in 1880 at the age of 15 with his two sisters, three brothers, and two parents. They came to Maine seeking refuge after having experienced the beginnings of anti-Semitic pogroms in Kiev, Russia. However, what they found when they arrived in Portland did not match their glorified expectations of what America would provide; it was cold, it was lonely, and it was predominantly non-Jewish. As a result, Jacob's parents and the rest of his family decided to return to their home country soon after they arrived in Maine; however, Jacob "felt free here," so he chose to stay and build a life of his own.

During the first few years that Mr. Thurman lived in Portland, the Orthodox Jewish community grew substantially. By 1883, there were enough of them that they were able to come together and build two Orthodox synagogues, as well as a small community center. Portland Jewry was thriving, and Jacob was pleased that he had decided to stay in "the Jerusalem of the North."¹ By the time Rebecca was born in 1896, Portland Jews were flourishing in the workplace as well as in the place of worship. Many of the Jews who had taken to peddling and shopkeeping upon first arriving in Maine years prior remained in those businesses; however, new Jewish immigrants were achieving real American economic success, Jacob Thurman included.

In Rebecca's early life, the Orthodox community in Portland shifted its focus from Americanization to maintaining Jewishness. Community members were committed

¹ Julia M. Lipez, "A Time To Build Up And A Time To Break Down: The Jewish Secular Institutions Of Portland, Maine" (2002), 3.

to creating a safe space where they could practice both commercially and religiously. Michael Cohen describes this shift in emphasis within the Shaarey Tphiloh congregation: “By embracing secular education, the English language, and gender roles that mirrored American mores, Shaarey Tphiloh created a dynamic new synthesis between American ideals and Orthodox Judaism.”²As a collective, they sought to provide for their children and to teach them what it meant to be ambitious professionally, academically, and Jewishly.

Rebecca recalls her own immersion into Jewish American life in Portland positively. She explains, “I never felt that we were governed by a blind loyalty to a religion.”³ Rebecca’s parents created an environment for their children that fostered their Jewishness, but encouraged their Americanism. “We accepted that that was the way that it was; we would practice both because that was the way that we always lived. We did what we wanted, and sometimes we felt pulled in a particular direction, but we knew what was expected of us.”⁴ This “pull” that Rebecca describes speaks to the situations in which she and her siblings were required to *choose* between their American lives and their Jewish ones. She remembers one conflict in particular: she had been practicing for months in preparation for a school orchestra concert with her sister, Anne. They were violinists, and they felt that they were crucial to the group’s success. They found out just weeks before the concert that it would be held on a Friday night, which conflicted with

² Michael Cohen, “Adapting Orthodoxy to American Life: Shaarey Tphiloh and the Development of Modern Orthodox Judaism in Portland, Maine, 1904-1976,” *Maine History* (2009), 174.

³ Rebecca Thurman Bernstein, interviewed by Konnilyn Feig, 1976. Portland Public Library. [http://mni.portlandlibrary.com/jewry.asp?t1=Rebecca Thurman Bernstein&id1=449&v=Konnilyn Feig&d=1976&a=Bernstein_Rebecca_1976&n=8](http://mni.portlandlibrary.com/jewry.asp?t1=Rebecca+Thurman+Bernstein&id1=449&v=Konnilyn+Feig&d=1976&a=Bernstein_Rebecca_1976&n=8), accessed March 3, 2015.

⁴ *ibid.*

the Jewish Sabbath. Rebecca recalls her father's reaction to his daughters' request to play in this concert. She says: "I remember we pasted a letter on his pillow telling him of our plight—we were afraid of what he might say—but the next morning he came into our room, sat down, and said: 'I understand.'"⁵ This tension that existed between the American experience and the Jewish experience was prevalent even within Portland's Orthodox community. Because the Orthodox population felt so strongly about having their children mesh with the other, non-Jewish children in secular schools, Jewish kids were faced with internal conflict. For this reason, Rebecca's parents were sympathetic to their children's experience, though, for the most part, Rebecca and her siblings were more partial to their Judaism.

Perhaps it was because Rebecca's parents were so open to letting their children make their own decisions with respect to Judaism that she chose to maintain her religiousness on her own once she grew up. "My father always wanted me to feel completely comfortable around him, and I always felt like I could speak openly with him. Honesty was a family value, and it was a Jewish value—but it really ran deeper than any sort of religion,"⁶ she explains. Rebecca's parents chose to raise her and her siblings in a relatively religious environment, but it seems that it was their choice to raise them in a completely integrated Jewish-American household that really contributed most to their success in transmitting a love for Judaism that would really stick. This was their strategy, and it worked.

Susman Russakoff: Jewish Life in Skowhegan

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

Susman Russakoff's experience as a Jew immigrating first to New York City, and later to Skowhegan, Maine, is centered on his love both for Jewish culture and Maine's natural environment. Russakoff grew up in a culturally rich Jewish household in Russia. In his memoir, he describes his upbringing purely and speaks highly of his parents' ability to uphold their family's religiosity, especially once they arrived in the New World in 1904. He remembers his mother and the crucial role that she played in his Jewishness and in his love for the Jewish American culture once they arrived in New York City. He describes the Jewish Sabbath and paints a picture of what it was like to bring the traditions of Old World Shabbat into their new life in the United States. He remembers Shabbat as "a special day in [his mother's] week,"⁷ and explains that she would prepare the meal just as she had in Russia so that they could continue to observe their old traditions in a new place.

Russakoff had been trained as a watch repairman in Russia, and he expected that he would find work in the city as a young man. However, upon arriving in New York City's Lower East Side, home to many of the country's Jewish migrants, Susman Russakoff was immediately, and quite vehemently, turned off. "I hated the place like poison—the filth, the crowded tenements, the inescapable smell—all of these things oppressed me," he wrote in his memoir. Russakoff's journey to Maine began when his friend came to him with a broken watch that needed fixing. His friend hailed from Skowhegan and explained that their town could use a professional jeweler like Susman. Russakoff was convinced that he could be more successful in a smaller, less crowded community; so, in January of 1907, Russakoff moved with his new wife and his two

⁷ Susman Russakoff, "Memoirs" (1965).

parents to Skowhegan. He describes the way that he felt when he arrived in Maine and experienced its nature for the first time. “The air was beautifully clear and frosty. The snow was as white as snow could ever be, and as one walked on it, it responded with a crispy clear singing. Its song was one of welcome to me.” For Russakoff, Skowhegan was a haven—both for his Jewishness and his Americanness.

Russakoff and his wife started their own family in Skowhegan, and as their children grew, it became clear that access to Jewish culture and religious education would seldom be available. Susman and his wife did their best to create a strong sense of Jewishness in their own home, but they wanted to expose their children to academic Jewishness, as well. The desire for economic prosperity and access to natural resources was what encouraged Russakoff to settle in Skowhegan, but the lack of strong Jewish culture for his kids forced him to move to a larger city, temporarily. As a result, Russakoff moved his family to Boston for twelve years; during which time he always dreamed of returning to Maine.

Once his children were somewhat grown, Susman and his wife returned to Skowhegan and continued to run his jewelry store. His children, too, returned to Maine upon finishing their secular educations in the city, proving that Russakoff and his wife were actually more successful in transmitting Jewishness in Maine than they had realized. In their case, absence from small town Jewry made their love for Jewish American life in Maine grow fonder.

The Levines: Jewish Life in Waterville

The family story with which I will close is my own. My grandmother, Judy Levine Brody, grew up in Waterville in the 1940’s. William Levine, her father’s first

cousin, opened a clothing store upon arriving in downtown Waterville called “Levine’s: The Store For Men and Boys.”¹² Levine’s was best known for its customer service and staff-wide sunny disposition; however, what my grandmother and her cousins remember most clearly about the store was the scent of chicken soup that seemed to permeate all the way back to the stock room. This blend of Americanness and Jewishness was exemplary of the success that the Levines had in transmitting Jewishness to the next generation. They infused Jewish culture into their every day American reality.

Judy’s father, Louis Levine, was William’s first cousin. Louis’s parents came to Maine in the 1890’s to join the rest of the family that had migrated ten years prior. At that time, new Jewish immigrants who thought to form a congregation in the center of town ran Waterville Jewry, primarily. Louis was raised in Waterville with his siblings and two parents and they led, collectively, a very culturally Jewish life. Their synagogue, Congregation Beth Israel, met for religious services on the high holidays and worked hard to create a strong sense of Jewishness within the greater Waterville community. Former community member, Lester Jolovitz, remembers the synagogue well and admits that the congregation’s lack of formal Hebrew education proved beneficial for his father who was well versed in religious life. Jolovitz remembers:

He would travel on his junk cart and give Hebrew lessons to the youngsters who lived in Waterville, because they didn’t have a Hebrew school.... Most of the young children were taught by their parents, and in my father’s case, where he was well educated, he provided some education.¹³

Parents in the Jewish community in Waterville believed deeply in a formal Hebrew education, though it was not offered through the synagogue.

¹² Recounting by Sara Miller Arnon and Julie Miller-Soros (April 2011).

¹³ Lester Jolovitz, interviewed by Samuel Levine, January 10, 2010.

Louis Levine felt especially strongly about pairing his own children with Hebrew tutors at a young age. My grandmother does not necessarily remember her years learning Hebrew very fondly. She explains, “One of the things I remember during my middle school years was how much I didn’t like the private tutor that they hired to come, twice a week, to teach me how to read Hebrew. It was boring! But I always listened, because I understood that it was important.” She may not have enjoyed it—but she admits now that her parents’ commitment to Judaism was what encouraged her *own* involvement in the practice as she grew up. She raised her children in Waterville, Maine, on the lake, *and* in the synagogue, just as she had been taught.

Initially, the Levines were attracted to Maine for its economic opportunity; however, they quickly found that Waterville had more to offer than just financial security. They found room for a Jewish life in Maine—and once they found it, they didn’t let it go.

For the Eastern European Jews who migrated to Maine in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, finding the right balance between preserving Jewishness and embracing Americanness was not easy. Their challenge was to create an environment that was conducive to incorporating a love for both; however, evidenced by these three families’ stories, there was no right way to strike that balance. There was no singular strategy for transmitting a passion for Jewishness that was applicable to every family’s situation in Maine. The common theme among all three of these sets of parents, and the piece that we should take with us, is a commitment to sharing everything that they loved about Judaism with their children as a way of *showing* rather than telling. All of their strategies successfully preserved Jewish life for the younger generation, and they collectively

provide evidence to support the notion that Jewishness can thrive anywhere—even in
Maine.