# ROCHESTER HISTORY

Edited by Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck
City Historian

Vol. LXIV Spring 2002 No.2

## Growing Up in the Old Neighborhood
## A Memoir of Joseph Avenue
## PART ONE

by Ruth Lempert

Kate and Sam Schafer stand inside the doorway of the Schafer Fish Market. Ruth and her mother, Kate Oratz Schafer, worked side by side with her father and her sisters. The family lived in a small flat above the store until 1941 when her father bought a house at 28-30 Hollenbeck Street. The whole family worked in the store which was only a few minutes away from Hollenbeck Street.
(Photograph courtesy of the author.)

Cover Photo: Sam Schafer waits for customers at 584 Joseph Avenue, the fish market he purchased in 1930. Note the peddler’s cart in front of the store. There were eight or nine fish markets along the Avenue as well as dozens of other stores. It was a street vibrant with activity, full of hope and vitality. (Photograph courtesy of author).

ROCHESTER HISTORY, published quarterly by Rochester Public Library. Address correspondence to City Historian, Rochester Public Library, 115 South Avenue, Rochester, NY 14604.
http://www.rochester.lib.ny.us/~rochhist/

Subscriptions to the quarterly Rochester History are $8.00 per year by mail. Foreign subscriptions $12.00 per year, $4.00 per copy back issue.

PRESSTEK-2

Father-in-law and mother-in-law of Sam Schafer, parents of Kate Oratz Schafer, Sam's future wife. They never came to America, but their son, Isaac, (pictured second in the second row on the right in a hat on the back cover) owned Oratz' Fish Market at 347 Joseph Avenue. Isaac was Kate's brother-in-law. (Photograph courtesy of the author).

Editor's note: In this two-part series of Rochester History, Ruth Lempert's memoirs give fascinating insight into growing up in the 1930s on Joseph Avenue in a family of Polish immigrant Jews. Her family's experiences were shared by hundreds of other families in Rochester's traditional immigrant neighborhood in the northeast section of the city. She recorded her father's memoirs for the family's history, but in doing this she acquired a deeper understanding of her own life and has preserved a fading view of our local history

## My Father's European Childhood

My father's store was a fixture on Joseph Avenue. He operated a fish market from 1926 to 1972. He fled Poland to escape violence against Jews and became a successful entrepreneur in Rochester by working hard for long hours. He never took a vacation or closed the store except for the Jewish holidays and the Sabbath.

No one dreamed that one day in 1972 he would be attacked during a robbery of his store, blinded and left for dead. A young man was also robbed and blinded less than 24 hours later as he worked at a gas station. The assailants were never caught. Though sightless, my father, Sam Schafer, recovered from his wounds and found the strength to begin a new life. The newspaper followed the story for months and wrote a follow-up eleven years later.

I was filled with wonder as I thought about my father's ability to pick up the pieces of his shattered life and fashion those shards and bits into a whole new existence. How did he find the spirit to surmount the cataclysmic change that had fallen upon him with no warning --to see the world in all its color one minute and to gaze into total blackness the next? What had made him able to come through a senseless, brutal attack that disabled him so cruelly? From where had come the strength to find again a joy and zest for living? Was it the struggles and dangers of his youth that had prepared him? What was his secret and what could I learn from him? Perhaps I could find the answers to my questions if I scrutinized the events of his life and how he had dealt with them? I began by asking him questions about his early life.

I knew he had been born in a little village in Poland in 1900 called Naselvitza. It must have been a tiny place because I could not locate it on any map. By the age of ten he was working in the family business selling milk, cheese, cream, and butter.

I had asked once how his family had made a living, and he explained, "We went to Klimentov, a market town, every day with our horses and wagon. It was maybe an hour away from our village. We sold milk in big metal cans to our customers. We sold to stores and to private people. We had to be back by 11:30 because the cows were milked at 12' clock, and we wanted to watch."

I was puzzled and asked, "Didn't you milk them yourselves?"

"Those weren't our cows," he answered. "They belonged to the landowner. He was rich. He had so much land you couldn't believe it. We bought the milk from him and sold it. We wanted to watch his people milk the cows -- nobody should put water in the milk. I remember like today how I watched that they should wash the cows so they would be clean. I walked around the barn and watched them every day. When they were done milking, they poured the milk into big cans. We had a measuring stick to measure how much was in it."

It seemed incredible to me that such a young boy, perhaps twelve or thirteen by then, should have so much responsibility. As he told me of his childhood, there was no self-pity. He was completely matter-of-fact. He enjoyed describing the world he had lived in and went on to tell me

more.

"Every day we took the milk to the city with our wagon and a pair of horses. They were good horses, very good horses. Oh, you don't see horses like that. One horse was so smart and strong. When we got stuck in the mud after a rain, he would bend down his knees and pull the wagon out of the mud, and the other horse he would pull him out, too. We took good care of our horses. We gave them good food, very good food. We took better care of our horses than some people are taking care of their children. When we got back from the city, we took the horses to the pasture

They could walk around and eat. Many times, I went in the pasture. I wanted to get up on the horse and sit on him. I patted him on the knee and he bent down. He knew I was too small to get on him unless he bent down. One time I was sitting on him, and I hit him a little."

I was so surprised that I interrupted him to ask, "Father, why in the world did you do that?"

"I don't know. You know how young kids are. It was just a little slap, but the horse didn't like that. He turned his neck around, and he took me by the shoulder and pulled me off. I still have the scar on my shoulder where he grabbed me. Then he stood up on his back legs over me. I was laying on the ground, and I thought it was Goodbye Charlie."

"He could have killed you," I said.

"Oh sure, he could kill me. He had iron shoes on his feet. But he didn't touch me." I could picture the scene in my mind: my father lying on the ground, the "very good horse" he admired, angry enough to throw him to the ground, upset enough to rear up on his hind legs as my father lay before him, but not angry enough to kill him.

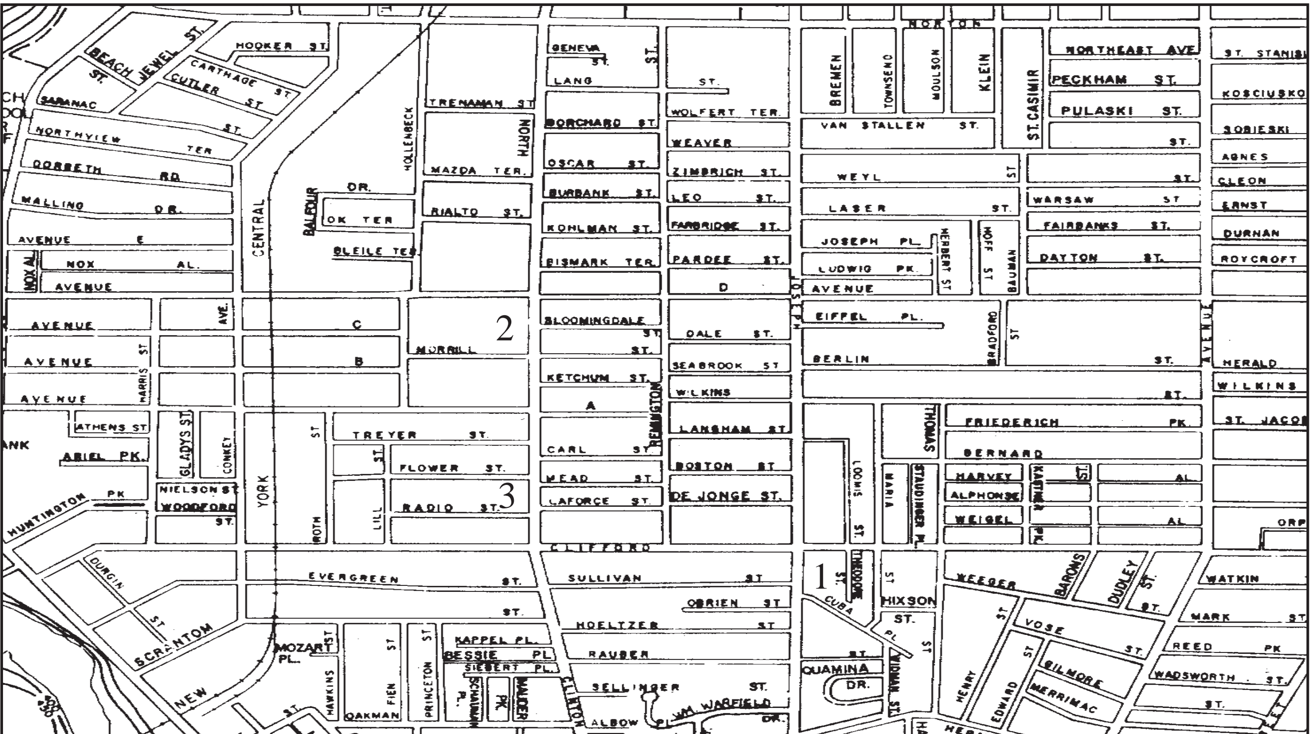
"Did you ever try to go up on him again?"

"From that time on, I didn't try to sit on him again. I wasn't taking any chances. A horse is a horse. He still pulled the wagon for me every day, and we got along."

Selling dairy products didn't bring in enough money. The family supplemented its income by buying chickens or eggs from the nearby farmers and selling those, too, in the market at Klimentov. Once they were in the city, they might buy rolls to sell to their neighbors when they returned to their little village.

"In Klimentov, we bought a dozen white rolls from a baker. They would give you three extra rolls if you bought a dozen. We would sell the rolls to the people in our village, but we would keep the three extra rolls. Boy, oh boy, those were so tasty. You haven't got no idea." He smacked his lips together in remembrance.

My father's family also had a little grocery store in their kitchen. He




Ruth Lempert’s family lived on Joseph Avenue above the fish market (1) before moving to Hollenbeck Street (2). She used to go to the Empress theatre (3) with family and friends.

said the whole grocery store was worth five dollars, maybe less. They sold flour, sugar, some potatoes, eggs, just a few items. Another means of earning money involved buying a portion of the landlord's harvest. My father, along with his cousin Paul, and the other family members, watched the ripening fruit trees in the orchard. They stayed overnight among the trees to make sure no one stole any fruit. The family put up a little shack for some of the watchers among them so they could take turns sleeping in its meager shelter.

My father had four brothers and four sisters. The whole family lived in two first floor rooms in a house that contained several other apartments. Right outside their door was a well from which they filled their barrels with water for drinking and cooking.

He said, "We had trees and land all around us." He lowered his voice when he said, "You know when you have to go to the bathroom, you have to go where there are trees."

His family did not even have an outhouse. There was no electricity, none of the amenities we take for granted. When I told him that it seemed like a difficult life for his family, he assured me they were better off than some people. "We had a real floor, not a dirt floor."

Although his family did not have much money, they had plenty of good food.

"We had a big breakfast every day—cabbage borscht with potatoes. The potatoes were cooked and cutup or mashed with cream. It was delicious. We had sweet cream butter, sour milk so thick you could cut it with a knife. The buttermilk was heavy like cream. A glass of it in hot weather --mm, it was delicious."

He relished talking about the food he remembered from his childhood. He licked his lips, and I enjoyed the gusto with which he described the food. He called coffee "kava" or "chicory", and told me how delicious were a cup of steaming kava and a thick slab of his mother's bread covered with sweet butter. Supper might consist of potatoes cooked with milk. His mother made bread every week. If part of it became moldy before the week was out, they would cut off the spoiled part and eat the rest.

Very often, itinerant peddlers stayed with my father's family overnight. They always received a good supper of borscht, potatoes, milk, kava, and bread. Sometimes there were as many as four or five of these traveling salesmen staying overnight. No one charged them money because everyone knew the peddlers barely made a living. I asked my father, "Where in the world did these peddlers sleep if you only had two rooms and there were nine children in the family?"

"One of the rooms was big. They slept on the floor," he said. "They

liked to stay at our house overnight. Everyone wanted to stay with Moshe Naselvitza. That's what they called my father." My father explained to me that there were many men with the name Moshe. Using the name of the village after his father's first name would distinguish his father from any others. Last names were not used. He went on. "Our home had a real floor, not just dirt like almost everyone else. We had two horses and a cow of our own. We didn't want to always drink the milk from the landlord's cows. We wanted our own milk," he said. On the Sabbath, services were held in his family's home. The Torah was kept in a special place in his house. The worshippers came from nearby villages. He said there were often as many as fifteen or twenty people for prayer service. On Saturdays, Moshe led the prayer reading for the morning service. Immediately afterward everyone was invited to the kiddush. Moshe Naselvitza and his wife, Ita, served cakes and schnapps. They did this every week. No one paid them. They were the philanthropists of the village. Ita, the mother, was the money manager in he family of eleven. She must have been astute and unusually capable at stretching their income. The family and all visitors were well fed, and Sabbath worshippers were treated generously.

I once asked my father if his family was ever mistreated by Gentile neighbors, or if there was violence in his village. He said that sometimes there were reports of pogroms in nearby areas, and the few village Jews would take shelter with them. But my father emphasized that their neighbors were respectful of his father and the family. He spoke with quiet pride when he said, "Our family was known for being good-natured. My father was never angry at people. Our Polish neighbors knew they could borrow a few rubles from my father. He never fooled people. Our neighbors had confidence in us. My father treated people right. My childhood was good, very good."

## Leaving Home

As he grew into his teens he assumed more responsibility for buying and selling. He walked through the little village buying chickens, flour, eggs, and sometimes a calf. He said he could pick up an eight- day-old calf and tell how much it weighed. He often bought a calf and carried it home. The next day he went to the market in Klimentov to sell it, along with the other commodities he had purchased. Sometimes his family

kept the calves they bought and had them slaughtered. The skin and the hind quarters were sold. The forequarters were kept for the family to eat because only those parts are kosher. His responsibilities at home included taking care of his six younger brothers and sisters. He was the third of the nine children. His two older brothers had already left the country several years earlier, leaving him the oldest one still home. His brother, David, was in South America and Max had gone to the United States. My father was a big help to his mother. He sang songs to keep the little ones amused. I was surprised because I hadn't known he could sing.

I said to him, “You never sang to us when we were little, did you?”

“No,” he answered. “I didn't.” He didn’t need to tell me that working to support all of us consumed most of his time. I remembered how he was up well before the rest of us, stoking the coal furnace, so that we children and my mother would be warm when we got up. He chopped ice, preparing the fish for the day's customers. I remembered how it was late when he came up for supper after he closed the store. Sometimes at night he would help my mother scrub clothes on a washboard in the bathtub. No, he didn’t have time to sing for us.

My father’s family knew of pogroms in the surrounding villages, of violence against Jews in nearby communities, but my father said that their neighbors respected them and liked them. His father, affectionately called Moshka by their neighbors, had often helped the villagers. They would not, my father claimed, allow harm to come to Moshka and his family. My father said that he and his family felt safe in their village of Naselvitza. They felt no sense of danger, no sense that the violence swirling just beyond their small village could quickly descend upon them. They did not understand that there might come a time when their friendly neighbors could do nothing to protect them.

The unrest and turmoil of the times grew worse. Russia dominated Poland, and the Cossacks, a group of daring horsemen and mercenary soldiers who were a law unto themselves, rode through small villages and the countryside terrorizing people. My father told me that when he was about fifteen years old, Cossacks riding big horses came thundering through the village. From their doorway, he and his bearded father watched the amazing horsemanship of the Cossacks.

“They were going so fast you could hardly see the horses-- maybe fifty miles an hour they were going. One Cossack saw us standing at our door. He stopped his horse so fast the horse stood up on his back legs. One shot and the Cossack killed my father. Me he never touched. You couldn't do anything.”

I thought about my father witnessing the murder, about his mother suddenly widowed, about the fatherless children, about an act of vio-

lence without meaning and I was filled with rage.

"What about a trial? What about bringing that murderer to justice?" I had asked him. He had laughed derisively.

"There was no such thing as a trial, especially for Jews. The Cossack said my father was a spy and that was why he killed him. That was the end of it."

When I heard the story of the Cossack shooting my grandfather, I was struck by the similarity of the words used by my father and his father before him. "My neighbors like me. They wouldn't hurt us. They wouldn't let anything bad happen to us." The words were spoken 47 years apart by Moshe Naselvitza Schafer in Poland and Sam Schafer on Joseph Avenue in Rochester, New York. Both men demonstrated the same confidence and trust in the people around them. I pointed that ironic coincidence out to Esther, my young sister. She said, "They were both wrong, weren't they?"

The following year,1916, the Russians were conscripting able-bodied young men into the Russian army. It meant a life sentence of servitude to a government that was hostile to Jews. Once in, getting out of the service was almost impossible. A government official served my father papers to join the army. My father had three months to get ready. He was sixteen years old. Instead of preparing to join the army, he fled and went from village to village, avoiding the police, whose job it was to find "deserters." He asked farmers if he could help them in return for a meal. One time he saw soldiers searching a nearby area. He ran across some fields and hid in a barn, jumping into a haystack and burrowing down as far as he could. As he jumped into the hay, he saw that a pitchfork leaned against the wall, and immediately he realized his hiding place could be dangerous.

From inside the haystack my father could hear the police enter the barn. He heard the pitchfork taken from its place. He held his breath as the pitchfork was plunged into the hay. As he lay tense and alert, he was trying to decide whether to run if he were discovered or to stay and fight. Again, the pitchfork was thrust into the hay, narrowly missing his face. The third time that the pitchfork was plunged into the haystack my father said he could feel the blades touch the skin on his back, but the force of the thrust was already spent. The blades never pierced his skin.

Apparently, the police decided to move on and left the barn. My father waited ten minutes to be sure the police were gone and were not tricking him. Then he emerged. He returned home exhausted, uncertain of what he would do. My father's mother, Ita, decided what her teenage son must do. She knew that she must send him away. "My mother sold everything she had," my father told me. "She had to pay 50,000 mark to

smuggle me over the border to Galicia and then to Germany. That was a lot of money. She sent me away. One night she told me, "Shlomo, it's time for you to go." I put my head on her shoulder. I didn't open my eyes. I knew how she felt. Her arms were around me. She said, "Don't ever come back and never write."

He told me this seventy years after it had happened, but he began to weep as he described their last embrace and her final words to him, and then I started to cry. We both sat there sobbing, and I thought of this remarkable woman whom I had never seen, and I said to myself, "I am part of this grandmother of mine. I will think of her courage. I will remember how she must have believed a better life is worth untold risk and great sacrifice."

It is not only what she embodies for me, but of what I am or can be, because she and I are bound by the ties of blood across the decades. My father remembers leaving in the darkness of night to go to a boarding point. A boat made to carry perhaps twenty people was filled with more than double that number. Other young boys fleeing the country were crowding into the small craft which took them to Galicia (Austria). Once safely there, his next step was to take a train to Germany.

My father had no money for the train trip, but he boarded the train and lay under the seats. The conductor went through each car collecting tickets. "I waited until the conductor passed by, and then I came out and sat down with everyone else," he said. "Nobody told the conductor I was under the seats. Maybe they knew I was a deserter, and if I was found out I would be shot." When he told me the story of his escape from Poland at the age of sixteen, I was amazed that he could handle the dangers and uncertainties with such presence of mind. "If you had no money," I asked, "what did you do when you got to Germany?" "I got off the train in Berlin. I walked around the train station, listening to people talking. I was trying to hear if anybody was talking Yiddish. I heard some people talking Yiddish, and I went up to them and I said, 'I am hungry. I haven't got no money and I haven't no place where to sleep.'

They said to me, 'Go to 55 Viesenstrasse. They will take care of you.'

I'll never forget that address. I went there."

My father slept on springs with a blanket for a covering. He said it was fairly comfortable. He could not remember who ran the house, but it must have been a Jewish organization. At 55 Viesenstrasse he met other boys and soon found a small group like himself, religious boys who had left home to escape the army. They were a little older than he, and they knew he had no money. They took him under their wing. The boys went out to eat and always took my father with them and paid for him. He did not want to eat too much, because he was afraid they would-

n't take him along, so he just ate enough to keep alive.

"I was always hungry. For over three years I lived like this," he said. He remembered how he and his friends were standing around the railroad station one morning, when they were asked if they wanted to shovel coal into the train. Their payment would be all the coffee they wanted and all the bread they could eat. They began shoveling coal. Afterward when they all sat down to eat, he ate all he wanted for the first time since his arrival in Berlin. A young disheveled man approached the boys as they sat and ate. He took out a knife and said, "If you don't give me something to eat, one of you will get hurt."

"We told him to sit down with us and eat all he wanted," my father said. "I knew what it was like to be hungry."

When I asked my father what he thought of Berlin he said, "I never saw such a beautiful city. Unter der Linden was the biggest widest avenue I ever saw. The streets were so clean you could eat off them." My father acquired a passport with the help of a Zionist organization. He planned to go to Palestine. Just then England closed the immigration to Palestine, and he was told they would never open it again. He waited a while, and then he started writing registered letters to two uncles in Utica, New York and to his brother, Max, in Rochester.

## The Consulate

My father's letter writing campaign brought the response he hoped for. His uncles and his brother sent him 25 dollars and a ticket to America. The next step was to get his visa stamped at the consulate. Impatiently he awaited word on what day he needed to appear. A year crept by before he received notice to go to the Consulate -- a year in which he and his friends supported each other's hopes. When the day finally arrived he got up early in the morning. He told me about it.

"I thought I would be first in line because I got up so early. The line was already out the door when I got there. I waited in line all day. When it was my turn next, I went into the Consul with the ten dollars it cost for the stamp. I had nine American dollars and one Canadian. The consul wouldn't take it. He said it had to be all American dollars. The two guards shoved me out of the way and out the door, and it was "Goodbye, Charlie."

“I walked back and forth in the hall. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t have any more American money. I looked in the mirror on the wall, and I saw my face was all red. I kept walking back and forth. A good-looking young man, maybe thirty years old, was there in the room. He was dressed beautiful in a white suit. He sees me walking back and forth. He asks me in German, ‘What is the matter?’ I told him nothing was the matter because I didn’t want to bother him with my troubles. He saw I kept walking back and forth. He asked me again, ‘What is the matter? Maybe I can help you.'

When I heard him say 'Maybe I can help you' I stopped walking back and forth, and I stood still. I told him what happened, and I showed him the money. I told him I didn’t have another American dollar.

"The man pulls out an American dollar. He wanted to give it to me. I didn’t want to take it because I couldn’t pay him. He didn’t even want the Canadian dollar.

‘I can’t pay you. I can’t take your dollar,’ I told him. He insisted that I take the dollar. I wanted his name and address so I could send him the dollar, and he said, ‘I’ll see you in America. I’ll look you up.’ I thought it wouldn’t be hard for him to find me or for me to find him --you just go out and look around. I didn’t know how big was America. When I had the dollar, I didn’t stand around talking. I walked right back in the Consulate’s office, past the two guards like I’m supposed to be there. I wasn’t going to ask them could I come back in. They might say no. I said to the man sitting behind the table, ‘The other Consul sent me out to get an American dollar,’ and I put the money on the table. They didn’t know what I was doing there, but the Consul saw the money on the table, and he put the stamp on the visa. Don’t ask how I felt. You can’t buy for all the money in the world that wonderful feeling I had.”

My father related this story several times to us and to the grandchildren, and I was always amazed at his good fortune.

‘Wasn’t he lucky that a kind stranger with an American dollar was there at just the right time?" I once asked my children, Maureen and Paul, who were listening with me.

“It seems hard to believe," said Maureen. Do you think it could have been an angel?” asked Paul. “He was dressed in white and he was beautiful.” Paul was then in high school, a muscular wrestler, an athlete, who went to prayer services often with his grandfather and was more open to a belief in angels than I was. Before laughing or discounting his idea aloud I stopped short. What did I know of the infinite mysteries of the world? Who was the handsome stranger in white? From where did he materialize? Was he a German world traveler who carried American money in his pocket? Did many Germans carry foreign money around?

Was he wealthy enough not to care about repayment although times were bad in Germany? Because he spoke German could I assume he was German? How is it he persisted in questioning my father and did not give up after the first rebuff?

I wondered if there were other people in the room my father was pacing in who might have helped him. Was there no one else there when the stranger approached him? I could not answer Paul's question. I said, "I don't know if he was an angel." My father was now ready for his voyage. He had his ticket to America which his two uncles in Utica and his older brother in Rochester had chipped in to buy and had sent to him. He had his visa stamped. Now he had to wait for his turn to leave. In a few months he was called and told his turn had arrived. He boarded a ship on the Hamburg-American line and in two weeks he arrived in America. It was January 1921, and he was not yet 21 years old.

His older brother, Max, met him at Ellis Island, or Kesselgarden as my father called this point of entry. My father was somewhat disappointed by his first look at his new country. Berlin had been so clean you could eat off the streets he had once said. New York looked dingy and shabby. It was littered with papers and was dirty. Max brought him to Rochester, and helped him find a place where he could get room and board. It was in a house owned by people that he and his family had known in Poland. Without delay my father wanted to look for work. Max, a tailor, worked in a clothing factory. He looked around for work for his newly arrived brother among the places he knew and talked to people in the industry. He soon found a job for my father working in a tailor shop owned by a Mr. Barnes.

The conditions of the job were explained to my father by his new boss. "You will work for four weeks without pay, learning the job. After four weeks you'll get paid ten dollars a week." My father agreed and started work immediately in the clothing shop. He told me how his first day started. "I sat down at the sewing machine, and I put my feet down and touched the pedals. It started to go. I jumped away because I was scared. I never saw an electric sewing machine before. I thought there was a devil in it." He used the word "Dybukk."

"Don't be afraid," said his brother who had accompanied him to his first day at work. "That's how a sewing machine goes. There's no devil here."

My father worked hard for four weeks. After the fifth week he looked at his paycheck and saw that it was seven dollars. "I went to Mr. Barnes and I told him I only had seven dollars --not ten like he promised. He said, 'Greenhorn, in America they keep a few dollars back in the beginning. Next week you'll get ten dollars.' The next week I saw that I had

seven dollars again, and I asked him about it. He said, 'Greenhorn, your work was no good.

I had to do a lot of it over.' He gave me a solution. He told me to come in at six I o'clock in the morning and get the coal stove going and clean up the place. So I agreed. I came in an hour before everybody else and got the stove going. I swept up the shop and made it look nice and clean. When the people came in to work, they were happy. The shop was warm and clean, not cold and dirty like before when they got to work.

"With the ten dollars I made, I paid five for room and board and the other five I could use for myself. One day a boss from another shop, a different one, came in and walked around. He looked at everybody working, and he came over to me. He asked me how much I made, and I told him ten dollars. He asked me if I would come to him to work for eighteen dollars a week.

I thought he was joking with me, and I asked him, 'Are you joking with me?' He told me no. He told me I would work 48 hours, not 80 or 90 hours a week. I said, 'All right, I'll work for you.' He told me not to say anything about it ' til the end of the week, after I got my paycheck, and then to tell Mr. Bames that I was leaving to go to a different job. I waited 'til I got paid, and I said, 'Mr.Barnes, I'm leaving. I have another job.' He asked, 'Greenhorn, where are you going?' A different name from Greenhorn he didn't have for me. I told him the truth, that I was offered eighteen dollars. He said he would pay me 18 if I stayed.

I said, 'You told me I'm not worth it ten dollars. How are you gonna give me eighteen?'

He answered, 'OK, OK, you'll get eighteen. Stay. '

I told him I promised I would take the new job. 'I'm going to go. I won't stay here.' "So Mr. Barnes said to me, 'OK, go."

I left and I started my new job. I worked only one week. The shop was a union shop and the whole shop went out on strike because of me. I told the boss I want to join the union. The union people said no, they couldn't take me. There were lots of Americans that couldn't find jobs. The union didn't take foreigners. I asked the boss what could I do, and he told me there was nothing for me to do, and he could not do anything either. So it was goodbye job.

"I couldn't find work for months. I owed my landlady 150 dollars. I had two uncles in Utica, Uncle Joe and Uncle David. They wrote to me. They told me to come to Utica. Maybe they could help me. I went to Utica and stayed with my Aunt Lena and Uncle Joe. I found a job with their help in a big clothing factory on Columbia Street that made boys' clothing. It was owned by a German Jew. He had over four hundred workers in his factory."

My father worked for a couple of weeks at a set salary and then he was put on piece work. He said he really went to town when he was put on piece work. He didn't care how many hours he worked. He was ambitious and wanted to get enough money to get on his feet and pay his debts.

"I worked on the noon hour. I took ten or fifteen minutes for lunch. People took an hour for lunch --not me. At five o'clock people went home. The boss asked me, 'Would you like to stay longer? We have a lot of work.'

I told him, 'Sure, as long as I get paid I'll stay.' It didn't take long and I was making forty or fifty dollars a week." Although Uncle Joe's son, Paul, was several years younger, he and my father became good friends. I never knew what kind of work my father did in the factory.

Years later Paul told me that my father was a presser who worked steadily in all kinds of weather, pressing clothes even when the pressing room temperature went up to 120 degrees. "Your father was a hard worker," Paul said. My father kept at his pressing job for over three years and amassed two thousand dollars in savings. He had long since paid his landlady the money he owed her, and now he was ready to look around for a wife. He could furnish a house and assume the responsibilities of a husband.

He told me he had been writing to a girl in New York City. Perhaps he had met her on the ship coming over. Maybe she had moved to New York from Rochester. My father didn't tell me how he knew her. "I was just friends with her. There was nothing specific between us. We just wrote. I went to New York to see her, and I was very much disappointed. I couldn't believe it was the same girl that I remembered. She didn't look good anymore. I lost my whole appetite."

Instead of staying several days to visit her as he had planned, my father left the next day. She wanted to take my father to the train station, but he declined her offer of transportation. That was the end of it as my father declared. He returned to Utica and began looking around again. He visited Rochester often. The pictures of him taken at that time show him to be a nice-looking young man of pleasing proportion. His eyes were an unusual shade of blue gray and his hair was light brown. Like many immigrants from Eastern Europe he was not tall. His papers describe him as five feet four inches. He never felt short because almost all the men he knew were about the same height. The women were shorter. There were numerous social events of young Jewish immigrants, and he enjoyed the parties and activities. At one such get together of young men and women an attractive girl caught his eye. He told his brother, Max, about her.

"I saw a girl. I don't know her name, but her brother has a fish market."

"The customer is always right" was my father's motto. The fish lay on chopped ice in the wooden boxes they were shipped in from Lake Erie, Georgian Bay or the Atlantic Ocean. Notice the scale to the left. It only told the weight. The National Cash Register in the enclosure rang the amount of the purchase. The family had to figure out the change. Photograph courtesy of the author.

## Marriage and Store

Perhaps one enchanted evening he saw her across a crowded room. He told me he first met her at a social gathering at the home of a friend of Max, his brother. He was visiting Max in Rochester as he often did. He liked this girl's looks he said. Max knew who my father was talking about. The girl was Kate Oratz and, unfortunately for my father, Oratz was already engaged. Max told him, "She's going to be married in a couple of weeks. She's already had two showers." My father answered, "She's not going to get married in a couple of weeks." I suppose Max smiled or shrugged. A couple of days after this conversation Max put in a call to my father in Utica to tell him the engagement was off, and there was to be no marriage. He didn't know what had happened, but there it was. "I'm coming in this weekend to take her out," my father replied. He never did believe in wasting time. He took the train to Rochester and called on her. She went with him to a moving picture show. She apparently spent no time recovering from the broken engagement. Thus began their courtship.Kate Oratz had come to America with her older unmar-

ried sister, May. They had been brought over by their uncle, Abraham Stolnitz, who had come to America much earlier with his wife and children. The Oratz sisters already had a brother, Isaac, in Rochester. We called him Uncle Yitzak.Uncle Abraham was considered a wealthy businessman by his peers.He had a successful fish market and was retired by the time Kate and May Oratz came over in 1921. He vouched that they would not become wards of the state. Uncle Abraham had sold his fish business to his nephew, Isaac Oratz, Kate and May's brother. That business became successful.

When I looked at pictures of the two sisters, Kate and May, as young women, newly arrived in this country. May seemed to me to be more striking. Her features were more chiseled, her hair darker, her expression proud, almost haughty. Kate had a softer look and milder demeanor. Her features were regular, her auburn hair was wavy. They both had deep, brown eyes. They both were attractive, but May apparently did not attract any suitors. The custom in Europe was for the older sister to marry before any younger sisters. Uncle Abraham wanted his older niece, May, to marry first. He spoke to my father, and offered him a sum of money if my father would marry May and forget about Kate.

My father said to Uncle Abraham, "I'm not getting married with money. I'm getting married with a girl." He turned down the offer."Do you think May knew you refused to marry her, even with a dowry?" I asked when he told me many years later.

"I think she knew. She used to say bad things about me to Kate." He pursued Kate and took the train into Rochester every weekend for a year to see her. Finally he took her to Utica to meet his Aunt Lena and Uncle Joe. He said that his Aunt Lena was an exceptional woman, and he had a great affection for his Uncle Joe. Kate liked them from the very beginning, and would always hold them in high regard. She and my father became engaged. They were married in Nathanson's Hall in Rochester, June 21, 1925. My father was 25 and my mother admitted to being two years younger. Maybe she was.

When he first told me this story I was in my teens, and I believed my father was prophetic. How could he possibly know that Kate Oratz would break off that first engagement? Back then, in a romantic blur of emotion, I thought that theirs must have been a love that was destined, a romance that would echo through halls of eternity. Looking back years later, it seemed to me that their marriage was a mystery. He was a risk taker, bold and outgoing, while she was quiet and afraid to take chances. They were opposite in so many ways, but they shared one vision that I always knew, without ever having heard it discussed. They wanted to give their children a life of opportunity and choices they had never had

and would never know.

From the first, their ship of marriage ran into rough weather. They had moved to Utica because of my father's good job, but work slowed down shortly after they were settled in their apartment. He had rented a five room flat above Nozik's Meat Market on Miller Street. My father had bought and paid for brand new furniture for all five rooms. He said they were happy as newlyweds, but when work became slow he started to worry. Although there was not enough work to keep the workers busy all day, they were not allowed to leave the building. He was impatient because he had to sit idly for most of the day. Wages for everyone dropped, and he could barely make a living. When my father complained to the boss about how he disliked sitting empty handed for most of the day, the boss said most people were glad to be working at all, and if my father didn't like the way things were, he knew what he could do. My father did not like the way the boss talked to him. He gave notice and he left.

My mother was already pregnant with the first of my three sisters, and now my father was out of work. They wrote to my mother's uncle, Uncle Abraham in Rochester, and Uncle Abraham, once again, came to the aid of his niece. He suggested that my father learn the fish business. He offered to teach him and to help set him up in business. My father came to Rochester alone, and together he and Uncle Abraham found a suitable store on Joseph Avenue. Uncle Abraham had another nephew who wanted to learn a business. He offered to teach them together. The idea was that the two pupils would become partners and run a successful business together.

As soon as he had rented the store with an apartment above it, my father sent for my mother. She was nine months pregnant. She sat on the train coming to Rochester wondering if she would have her first baby on the train. Several doctors in Rochester refused to accept her as a maternity patient because she was so far along. When she did find one, it was just in time. My big sister, Marcia, was born one week after my mother arrived in Rochester.

Meanwhile, the fish business classes went on for the two students. My father said that Uncle Abraham was a tough taskmaster. He described a typical class."Uncle was rough with us. He kept saying we were both no good. He told me my fingers were too thick. They were so thick that they could hardly bend. He told me, 'You'll never be a businessman. You can't even bend your fingers. How could you be a businessman?' He told us both we were terrible at cleaning fish. He said the other nephew wasn't any better than I was. He didn't see how we could make good.

I figured whatever he's telling me,  it's for my own good. He was trying to teach us this way, so I kept my mouth shut. The other nephew couldn't take it. He just left, and we didn't know where he went. Much later, I found out he went to New York City to work in a fish market cleaning fish. He did very well. In New York, people get tips and get paid good.

'I was still trying to learn everything about the business when the uncle died. I was alone like a fish out from the water, but I kept on working by myself. I learned while I worked. Kate came downstairs to the fish market and helped me. Then we worked together."

In the midst of this difficult situation, May, the older sister, came to live with them. I never did find out why she made the move to my parents' apartment. When I knew her during my childhood, she was a jealous person always making disparaging remarks about most people including us.

"She made my life miserable," my father told me. "She said I was uneducated and common. She told people that she worked hard to keep our place clean that she was always trying to help Kate with laundry and cooking. Masha (Marcia, the oldest of us) was a little baby and to listen to May you would think that she raised her by herself. She told everyone she took care of the baby all the time."

"I don't know how you could handle it father," I told him. "Aunt May used to jangle my nerves after two minutes in her company. Didn't you say anything to Mother?"

"I didn't want to say anything because I thought Kate would feel bad. I kept my mouth shut."

My Aunt May with her difficult personality, did not find a husband here and in 1927 she decided to go back to Europe, to her native village.

"She went back to Poland to look for something. She found something," my father said.

From my father's voice I could tell that he thought the "something" was not too good. Aunt May returned from Poland a married woman. Her new husband, David, arrived in Rochester a short time later. Unkind rumors circulated that Aunt May was much older than her new husband. When she was in her eighties, Aunt May told me that no one knew she was about ten years older than Uncle David. It was classified information that actually was public knowledge.

One relative surmised that David had wanted to come to America, and marriage to an American citizen was an efficient way of achieving this goal. Aunt May was either ignorant of those rumors, or she ignored them. She was very pleased with her status, and she made it clear that her new husband was a very well educated, pious man, far above all the

men in the neighborhood, especially my father.

Uncle was a shochet and mohel. He was a ritual slaughterer and he performed circumcisions—two vocations I found disconcerting grouped together. Wielding a knife skillfully was important in both activities. When Uncle's hands got shaky he didn't know enough to retire, and we worried about the outcome for some of his tiny clients. For a long time my parents deferred to Uncle David's opinions in many matter because of his superior religious education. For instance he believed he had a remedy for a wart that grew in the middle of my cheek. He needed the fresh blood of a dove to get rid of it. As a ritual slaughterer he knew how to obtain the bird and to obtain its blood. He did this in front of me and then applied the blood to my cheek. My mother tried to calm me during this medical procedure. When the wart remained Uncle suggested another nostrum. Urine was applied to my cheek. I had no idea from where it came or whose it was. Eventually my mother took me to a dermatologist.

To strangers Uncle David appeared kind and generous. His wife soon found that he was tight-fisted and begrudged her spending money. At every opportunity, he pointed out that we girls were not observant enough and our parents were derelict in their religious duty. When we were a little older we ran in the opposite direction when we saw Uncle, mainly because none of us wanted to be caught in his warm and overly tight embrace. But all that was years later. When he first came to this country Uncle David and my aunt looked to my parents for help. Despite my father's shortcomings, Aunt May and Uncle David moved in with my mother and father and baby Marcia. They must have been comfortable because no effort was made to find a place of their own. Even when Uncle David found lucrative work, they continued to enjoy the free Schafer hospitality. My father finally felt he had to speak up.

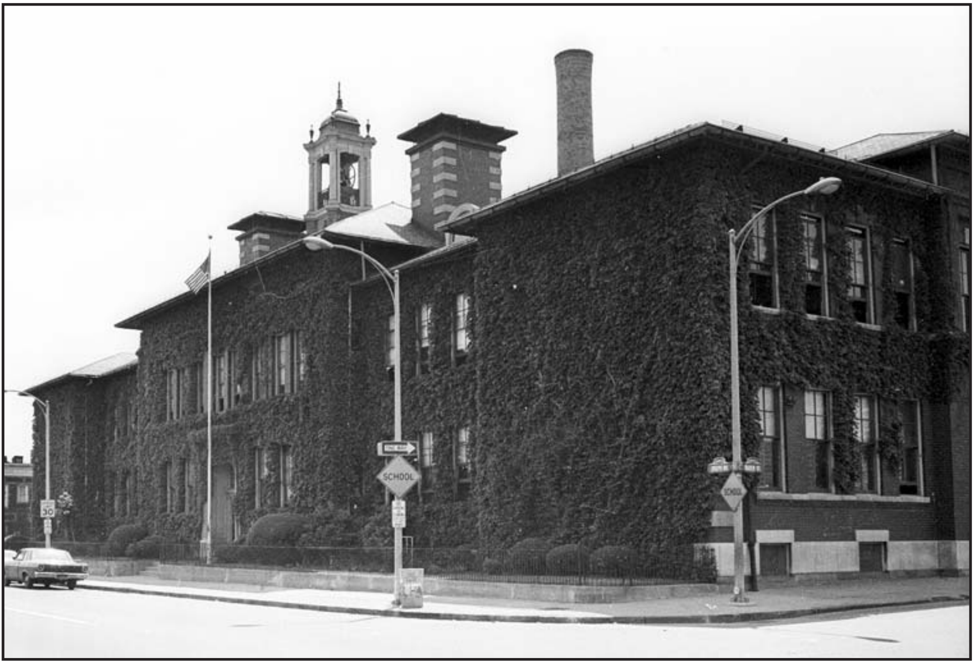
In private he spoke to my mother. "Katie, we're supporting two extra people. He's got a good job. They should start to pay us a little something. It isn't right that for them to expect us to support them."

My mother spoke to her sister, and it was shortly after their discussion that my Aunt May and Uncle David found an apartment of their own—not for long, though.

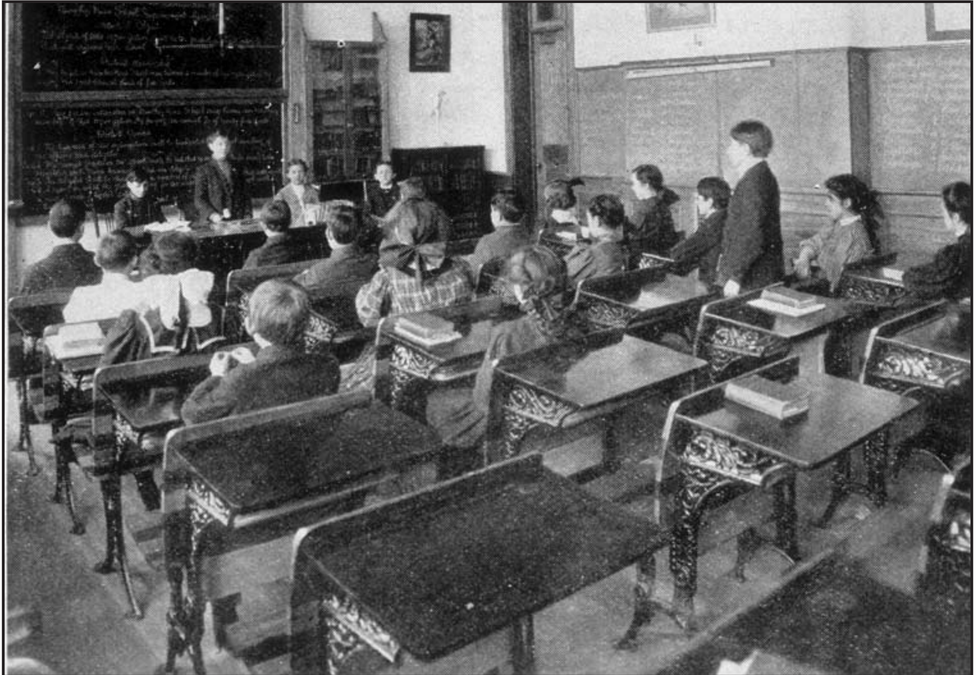
In 1930, the year I was born, my father bought a larger store that also housed three apartments. My Aunt May and Uncle David moved into the first floor apartment. After several miscarriages Aunt May finally carried a son full term. My cousin, Emanuel, was born in 1932. He and I were closest in age and played together until my uncle decided I, and indeed no one, was religious enough or good enough to play with his son. It was here, at 584 Joseph Avenue, that I grew up.

As a child Ruth's husband, Dan, watched the construction of B'Nai Israel about 1928/29. Photograph courtesy of City of Rochester.

The 4th Precinct Police Station on Joseph Avenue. Ruth recalls no serious crimes in her childhood. Neighborhoods or community standards governed the residents' behavior. Residents respected authority of parents, teachers and law enforcement. Photograph courtesy of City of Rochester.




Ruth Lempert attended School Number 9 in third, fourth and five grades. This 1928 classroom is similar to one Ruth attended in the building shown. Photograph courtesy of City of Rochester.



Back cover: photograph of the Abraham and Esther Oratz, their children and grandchildren. Ruth Lempert's Uncle Yitzak (Isaac Oratz, far right, seated in second row in the hat, who owned Oratz Fish market) went back to Europe in 1927 and posed with his parents, siblings, their spouses and children. Her mother, Aunt May and Uncle Yitzak had already left their native country to live in America. The others chose to remain. They probably perished in the holocaust. The Lemperts never heard from them after World War Two. (Photograph courtesy of author).