

MF 202 **Jewish Experience of Bangor, Me.**

MF202 Jewish Community of Bangor, Me.

Date last updated: 10.05.2017 by KWynn
Norman Minsky, Leonard Minsky, and Jordan Alpert, interviewed by Elizabeth Stevens, September 27 and October 4, 2017, South Stevens Hall, UMaine, Orono. Also present Debby Alpert and Katrina Wynn (to assist). The Minsky brothers and Alpert talk about their family backgrounds; the old country, leaving and moving to America; moving to Bangor; their jobs primarily as peddlers in the beginning then store owners and finally professionals like lawyers and doctors; anti-Semitism. Many stories of family members and community members. Specifically focused on the Alpert-Cohen and Epstein families.

Date last posted online: Note: This project was done at the behest of Norman Minsky by Elizabeth Stevens at Bangor Public Library. Katrina Wynn was involved to assist as Stevens wanted support both for conducting the interviews and archiving them.

Location: Physical supplemental material (control folders) is in Box 1/1 29B-9-3, born digital materials are on the access and master drives.

Text: 11 pp. index, 6 pp. release forms

Use Tracker as of 8/10/15 Recording: **mfc_mf202_audio001, mfc_mf202_audio002** 199 minutes

Audio: original = wav, master = wav, access = mp3. Text: original = docx and paper, master = .odt, access = pdf.

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Format

To Web

Norman Minsky (NM), Leonard Minsky (LM), Jordan Alpert (JA) by Elizabeth Stevens (ES).
September 27, 2017, in South Stevens Hall, UMaine.

Also present Debbie Alpert (DA) and Katrina Wynn (KW) (to assist).

Notes: 1) What follows is a rough time and content log to assist researchers which attempts to capture the summarized or central ideas of the different parts of the interview. 2) You can hear Katrina typing in the background and occasional noise from the hall as it was too hot to keep the door closed. 3) Items in brackets [] were added from post-interview research or conversations. 4) In researching terminology for this interview, Katrina Wynn ran across "Our Jewish Downtown" written in 2012 by Marcia Leiberman, which would be a good resource of anyone interested the Jewish Bangor community: <http://mainejews.org/images/22July2012/OurJewishDowntown.pdf>.

Recording: mfc_mf202_audio001 88 minutes long.

00:00 Introduction by Katrina

Each person introduces themselves:

Norman Minsky: b. May 25, 1930

Leonard Minsky: b. 1927

Jordan Alpert: July 20, 1953 Bangor Maine, family historian for Alpert and Cohen family of Bangor Maine.

02:20 ES: What do you know about the lives of your ancestors in the Old Country?

LM: He says he knows very little. Talks about the family's roots in the old country: from a place that was back then alternatively Russian and Polish. **He?** came from there? One of 9-10 children, most of whom emigrated to the USA.

03:20 NM Grandfather named **Hillel** grandmother named **Leah**. From Krevia (now in Belarus). Talks about the stories NM's father told about his grandfather and father studying the good books all day and his wife ran their store.

LM Their grandmother was proud of her role in assisting her husband by running the store so he could be the town educator

NM More talk about the family store. Religious education, where **he** went away for his education. He went to different family members to get fed while there.

06:40 JA **Reuven Alperowitz** Family from same province, **Vilna** province, town called **Sosenka**, now in Belarus, then Lithuania/White Russia. He was a lumberman. Had a big family. His son-in-law was JA's great-great-grandfather, **Moshe Alperowitz**. His son (JA's grandfather) was the first direct ancestor to come to Bangor. His uncles had come in the 1880s and changed their name to Cohen. His grandfather didn't change his name. They came around 1881, which coincided to new anti-Semitic laws in the homeland: the May Laws. [May Laws were proposed

by minister of internal affairs Nikolai Ignatyev and enacted on 15 May (3 May O.S.), 1882, by the Emperor Alexander III of Russia. Remained for 30 years.-Wikipedia]

09:58 LM Discusses the Russian draft. For a Jew being conscripted into military was a death sentence. Families often changed their last names to avoid the draft. It can be unusual to know family last name because of this.

10:55 NM After WWII his father looked for a number of last names that may have been: **Mitsgoon? Abrahamson**. Talks about a visiting scholar from the home country

11:55 JA Adding to LM comments about the military and May Laws. An attempt to “Russify” the Jewish people.

13:44 NM More about the military, that Jews were basically slave laborers because they weren’t considered not Russian.

13:52 JA More about military. He did have a career military ancestor, which was rare.

14:30 LM The family names here in Bangor: most of family came from their **maternal grandmother’s** side of the family, the **Epstein** family.

NM The dominant families were the **Epstein’s** and the **Alpert-Cohen** families, in terms of size and influence. (JA mentions that his father had 40 cousins)

16:00 JA Can’t even count the whole family. Largest groups, these two families

16:18 LM Then the next generation took up the “American” way and decreased the number of children

17:05 ES Why did they come to Bangor Maine?

17:17 LM No idea, thinks the Epstein’s were probably peddlers and that was the end of the line.

NM Their uncle (**X?**) went to Boston, was very poor, worked for the city. His father (**Myer Minsky?**) when there too and he also had many family up here too, so came here. Bangor was more prominent at the turn of the 1900s than it is now.

LM Went into dry goods business. Worked on Exchange Street. Worked with lumber workers.

19:39 NM The dry-good businesses, tailoring, and shoes shops were because Jews couldn’t own land, so couldn’t be farmers. They couldn’t join the guilds, so had none of those artisan skills. So they were peddlers, shoe-cobblers, tailors, diamond industry, money-lenders, etc. Talks about Polish anti-Semitism, where Jews were enforcers for the Polish nobility. Bangor had ½ dozen shoe factories, all Jewish owned. Jews were peddlers and store-keepers. They couldn’t get loans except from synagogue, \$3-4, enough for a new immigrant to buy some goods which they sold and paid the synagogue back.

21:55 LM Tells a story about how his father arrived in Boston and was to meet his brother (who worked for the city). Signal set up since they had never met. But the uncle sent a neighbor in his place and his father didn’t know it wasn’t his brother.

22:55 NM Story about their step-mother (**May**) coming through Ellis Island. Her father was late and she was left alone. Consoled by a black woman, she'd never heard of or seen a black person before.

23:40 JA The earliest ancestor emigrated through Boston, not New York. Heard about lumber industry up here. Didn't speak English. Some may have spoken Russian. All spoke Yiddish. Became a peddler because of the language barrier. Commercial traveler. Talks about the inventory.

26:45 LM His father 1st cut ice and then worked at a lumber mill.

NM Father started first Zionist group. Morphed into **Sons and Daughters of Zion**, became the primary social group in the area.

27:30 JA 1902 **Grandfather? cousin** came. Went to night school for English. Other cousin came to Bangor and worked as peddler and tailor and was a Rockefeller tailor. He sewed on the buttons badly on purpose. Left and went to Detroit. Went into junk business and made a fortune.

29:15 NM Anything that didn't require the skills because so few open to Jews.

LM and JA: Recycling business.

30:21 ES: Have you been in contact with relatives from the old country?

JA: In contact with their decedents.

NM: Plugging JA's book about the Alpert-Cohen family. Family tree of Epstein family available at Bangor Public Library.

LM: Story: Father in wholesale of confectionary business. **Ginsburg**, another big Bangor family. Great uncle sold their goods at his store. Irish man (32:30) employee story about the fun of haggling over \$0.23/lb for jelly beans.

33:30 JA: There was a transition. 1st generation started and ended at peddlers, because they came when they were older. Grandfather came at 16, but learned English and was able to stop peddling. Sold his horse for \$200 to a lumberman. Went into business with a cousin and had a store.

NM: Father did peddle or traveling salesman for his confection business.

36:20 LM: Their (**Father**) went to open a little store. **Brownwood** Junction was a big transition town. TR Savage, a wholesale grocery in Bangor (started Hannaford). Savage himself gave him \$500 credit to start his store. 1911 or 12.

37:30 NM: **Mr. Russ** worked at **Merrill Trust**. Would give small loans to Jews. Only one willing to do so. Shouldn't be forgotten.

38:30 LM ½ dozen Jewish businesses in Pickering Square. Called kitting. One check would go from person to person and be endorsed by something like 40 people.

39:00 NM: A bit more formal later. Who had written checks they couldn't cover. Met every Friday night to help each other not bounce checks.

39:35 ES How did their lives improve?

JA: They had children and they wanted to go to college. High rate of graduation

NM (takes over) Jewish stress on education.

JA: The generation that didn't go to college, if they owned stores etc. they did OK. Could borrow funds, extended credit, could rent places. There were standouts and average successes.

Enterprise Shoe. Main Street must have had 5 shoe stores, 4 owned by Jews, 1 Irish. **My father** had a drug store. Lots of jewelry stores. They were entrepreneurial. **Simon Cohen** (43:00) was a standout. He started by selling matches on the street and ended up owning a large percent of downtown Bangor. He had a discount store. He was a tycoon. All his sons went to college. The next step was to become a professional (doctor, lawyer, etc.) and their children did.

46:00 NM We just always knew we were going to college

ES Not the daughters?

JA: Yes the women too.

All discuss the women (The **Connors**)

JA: So yes, but not sure what percentage of the Jewish women did.

NM: There were 250-300 families. Now 120-30 area.

48:30 LM: The Jewish community became a lot more prosperous during and after WWII. Two Jewish owned shoe factories in Old Town, two in Bangor. The generation that followed us is disappearing. I went into the family business. My daughter couldn't stand it. Very few of my generation that has family here. No manufacturing sector here anymore.

51:00 KW Asks to clarify the change.

NM: The Old Town group is gone. But there are still some in towns around. Rockland, Bath, Waterville. True of Maine in general, not just Jewish population, we lose the well-educated.

52:30 ES: Asking about their or their parents' childhoods

LM: We are first generation. Their parents didn't really have childhoods/don't want to remember them.

JA: I'm second generation. My father's experience was of a typical American, New England upbringing. Only Jewish family on the west side of the city in the 1920s-30s. Just one Jewish business. With Bar Mitzvah and religious education.

NM: It was typical and ours was typical. But all our friends were Jewish. We didn't mingle with the Christian family (55:30). Separate but equal feeling in socializing. But a bit of anti-Semitism.

LM: Couldn't play golf at the **Penobscot Valley Country Club**

NM: Jewish doctors had to wait to be admitted, no Jews on the important boards.

JA 57 My parents did have lots of non-Jewish families because of where his father grew up, lots of Catholic friends.

NM: Jews sometimes called clans. But it wasn't their choice

JA: They made their own clubs when not able to join others. Pinewood Club, now the Lucerne Inn, was their country club.

LM: Some things didn't matter if you were Jewish or not. Mother (**May?**) worked on March-of-Dimes. Father was a Mason.

NM: When NM joined they had to wait to introduce him until specific people left.

61:30 ES: Tell me about your mothers before they married?

LM: My grandfather lived in Montreal and his mother born there, lived near nuns. Close relationship with the Mother Superior.

NM: My step-mother lived in Chelsea in terrible conditions. Left at 12. Worked 50 hours. Supported herself.

DA: Clarifying

NM: **May** was their birth month, **Bess** their step-mother after May died.

NM: Sisters of May became good friends with Bess.

JA: Mom from Brooklyn. Another world. Everyone spoke Yiddish. School started in Yiddish. Sheltered home. Disabled brother.

01:06:10 NM: Men would go to Montreal to go to the city (and sometimes get wives there).

(Short water break)

(pre-recorder ES asking about anti-Semitism)

NM: no Jews allowed in golf tournament

JA: Not uncommon. LA and NYC the same. Now level playing field

01:06:00 ES Was their less anti-Semitism in rural areas?

LM In that group of people (a previous generation)

JA: **Brownville Junction**. Retired in Bangor

NM: Stained glass windows of **Mr. X Cohen and his wife**

JA: **He?** broke down a lot of barriers. Advisor to governors, store on Exchange St. with a politician filled backroom. He must have been charismatic and smart. If he encountered anti-Semitism he knew how to deal with. I did not experience anti-Semitism directly. And my dad could only tell me 1 or 2 things he directly experienced (didn't walk straight by St. Mary's because afraid of bullies).

1:09:44 NM Club equivalents for Jews and non-Jews in school. Not a lot of overt anti-Semitism.

1:10:20 JA Tells a story about Billy Sunday. **My grandfather** (peddler, store on Main St. brother had a store on another street) had a confectionary store. Guys came by from railroad guys, ladies coming in for ice cream on the weekend. Billy Sunday, a revival meeting leader, came. After this meeting two ladies in their Sunday best came in for ice cream. They said Billy Sunday said all the Jews are going to hell to which he responded "then they'll soon turn it into paradise". I think many had that attitude of taking the bad and making it good.

LM: A little bit more overt anti-Semitism then when you were growing up. I remember it is grade school. Golf lesson story.

NM: Tournament (**Bob Tusky** PGA player won that one) NM was the president of the sponsoring group was invited, but they seemed very relieved when he couldn't go

1:15:30 ES: How did your families spend your evenings together?

LM: Not watch TV. Had a radio. My dad liked TV later. Homework. Music.

NM: Sat around and listened to the radio. **Kate Smith** was on every Friday night.

LM: Still listened past bedtime in their room.

NM: Story about them fighting and breaking their beds.

JA: Dad worked a lot. Family meals like twice a week. Socializing when he had the time off. Lots of independence for the kids.

LM: Father spent lots of time of organizational work. Jewish work. **Jewish National Fund, Zionist**, etc.

NM: (takes over) **Sons and Daughters of the Zion.**

LM: Need to leave soon. Have a speech later. Can we meet later?

NM: LM and JA know the non-family history. Local businesses.

01:20:50 ES What event do you remember most from growing up?

LM: Pearl Harbor

NM: Same

JA: 6 Day War in 1967

Part 2

Norman Minsky (NM), Leonard Minsky (LM), Jordan Alpert (JA) by Elizabeth Stevens (ES). October 4, 2017, in South Stevens Hall, UMaine. Also present Debbie Alpert (DA) and Katrina Wynn (KW) (to assist).

Note: More background cell noise this time.

Recording: mfc_mf202_audio002 81 minutes long.

ES: Introduction

ES: Asks about the various Jewish businesses and how they impacted Bangor Maine

JA: All kinds of retail stores, some mentioned last week. They had many other businesses besides retail: automobile parts and restaurants, like The Brass Rail. (NM adding details. LM a bit as well.)

LM: Hancock Street had 5 butcher markets owned by Jews. Some kosher some not.

All three: talking about the different business downtown and the other groups besides Jews.

JA: Standard Electric

NM: Started out small

JA: National Confectionary, the Epstein family business.

LM: Which morphed into the paper business.

JA: The Sylvia Ross Home. Talks about Sylvia and her family's Unitarian conversion.

LM: German Jewish migration to Bangor. There were a number of prominent businessmen that were before our time.

14:00 NM: Families disappearing by marrying non-Jews. 1860s was a second wave of German Jews. Talks past families with Jewish ancestry, example WA BEAN. Talks about **cemetery**.

15:30 LM: Joke about Jewish

16 NM: Another saying.

LM: Strong feelings between Lithuanian Jews vs Russian Jews. Almost like marrying out of the faith to cross that line.

NM: Splinter groups

JA: Cobra Show. Jerry Kaprow, who owned Bangor Candy.

18 LM “Cattle rustlers” families (Smith, Colbert)

18:30 Moderate vs conservative synagogues. Beth [means “house of”] Abraham (modern orthodox). Beth Israel (conservative [meaning they were part of the conservative movement]). Beth El (reform [meaning they were part of the reform movement]) is the 3rd group that started in the 1930s, but was reincarnated about 30 years ago. A number of break-offs.

21 ES: Who participated in the Jewish Community Center?

LM: There was a community Hebrew school and from that there were social events, but not a lot. Came up with a Jewish Community Center, which was part of a national movement. It was later run by the Jewish Community Council. Community Center combined all the factions of the city, had a paid executive director, and was successful for many years. Had the United Jewish Appeal. LM is a past president. Broke up, in his opinion, when Beth Abraham started a Hebrew School. Eventually as the population dwindled and each synagogue felt they needed their own Hebrew School.

NM: Talks about the **Chapel?**. The JCC has collapsed. Only the Chapel left. There was an endowment. Discusses the directors and lectures series. It (the JCC?) started within a month of the same activity in Portland.

27 LM **Nathan Liss**

NM (takes over) was the final donor.

JA: **Beth Liss Cemetery**

NM (takes over)

28:25 ES: What about your generation’s experience with the JCC?

JA: His experiences. They had a library and auditorium and had bar mitzvahs there, Hebrew school, kids met up there. Integral part of my upbringing.

29:30 LM: Anecdote about a kid’s play and Catechism. Another story about [William] Bill Viner, created the Bangor YMCA endowment. He also organized one for the Jewish community. It became a bit of a social club. He thought of it as an emergency fund. As the older generation passed away the organization floundered. LM was part of resurrecting it (the treasurer).

33:00 NM: Discusses the money. The community has shrunk, we can’t support three synagogues. Discusses the Jewish Funeral Chapel on Center Street.

35:20 LM: EMMC doctors with Christian wives, created the reform congregation.

36:20 NM: The membership of Beth El is about 1/3 Bangor Jews, Beth Israel is 2/3 Bangor membership. Beth Abraham is almost 100% Bangor families, though many of the younger generations no longer live in town.

37:30 ES: What was the most important lesson from your parents or that they most wanted you to learn?

JA: Education. It's the great equalizer, can't confiscate your education.

39:30 NM He's absolutely right

39:40 LM: Community spirit that you weren't alone (both in terms of support for you and your obligation to support others).

41 NM: Jews couldn't rely of the Christian community, which is why they were independent businessmen

41:20 JA: No Jewish people were employed by Christians. Started their own businesses.

42:30 LM: To the credit of the Bangor community, that has evolved

JA: Night and day

NM: That's more recent than you might think

JA: YMCA was integrated way back in the day. JA's dad was a camper in Camp Jordan in 1920s, JA was a camper too.

44:00 NM I went to Camp Jordan too. Mandatory Christian services on Sunday morning.

JA: I had that too, but it was very generic, more interfaith. I went in the 1960s though and NM went in the 1940s. I didn't observe Sabbath while there. The founder of Beth Israel was Alpert-Cohen, but when JA was a kid they went to Beth Abraham (which was more moderate).

46:40 LM When troop got cycled out of Fort Roosevelt, went to Jordan just for a week or two. Don't remember much, no pressure. Nor was there any in the Boy Scouts.

47:40 Troop 3, Izzy (Isadore) Alpert (JA dad's 1st cousin) was their scout master. He ran the tobacco place in Old Town.

48:30 ES Can you expand on the caring for other aspect you mentioned?

LM: I don't know if that was a Jewish thing, but it was a thing our family did. My dad had more lapel pins than you could shake a stick at.

49:30 NM: He was a WWI and WWII vet

49:35 ES: What about your family?

JA: I don't think my dad did much, but his father did a lot. My parents were focused on work and raising the family. He was sent to Hebrew school to get a Jewish education: religious, historical, ethical.

51:40 NM: Justice and righteousness seems to be the foundation of Judaism. Discusses slavery

52:50 ES: Asks about slavery

JA: Talks about slavery

NM: And progressive, for the time, divorce laws and women's rights.

LM: Not talking about modern slavery, pre-Christ slavery.

54:30 NM: Some people still settle things in Jewish court.

54:30 ES: Asking about their parents' dreams

LM I don't remember much discussion on that. Nothing particularly Jewish, wanted the next generation to be better off and aid them in that.

55:30 NM: One element that was different was Zionism.

56:18 LM But the Irish felt the same, and the Kurds are living through it today.

56:40 JA Grandparents didn't articulate it as such, but one of their children, his aunt Katya Alpert Gilden was very political and progressive (about 70 years ago) with similar ideals that people are working on today and those seeds probably from her father. In the 1920s-30s, the world was very different.

58:45 LM: I remember her and her reputation

NM: Jews always associated with democratic vote

59:20 ES: Asking about Bar Mitzvah, your speech.

LM: Brief, it was a good party. It was supposed to have real religious significance, but less so as far as I was concerned.

60:30 How does your religious identity influenced the rest of your identity?

NM: Bar Mitzvahs are much more social

61:00 JA: Being Jewish has enormously influenced me. It's not just a religion, but about being part of a long line of people.

63:55 NM: Described the phenomena of being a great Jew who doesn't believe in God.

64:30 LM I'm an agnostic Jew. $\frac{3}{4}$ of people in Israel not religious, but Jewish.

67 JA: The focus is on action, we all agree on that. Whether the impetus is a God or not. Christianity has this wide range as well.

68 LM: The Catholic Church is going through it now.

69: ES What haven't we covered?

JA: Much more unified spirit than it may seem. Contributions to synagogue included churches.

70:30 NM: Jewish Cemetery was vandalized and contributions came from all faiths.

JA: It's a wonderful thing

71:45 This has been an interesting conversation. I hope we've been reasonably historically accurate.

72:20 NM: Talks about after WWI, fundraising for starvation efforts for Jews and Henry Morgenthau. Sense of community and responsibility.

74:40 ES: What would you like researchers to take away about the Jewish community of Bangor Maine

LM: A glimpse of our slice of history.

75:40 JA: Bangor has had its ups and downs, so has the Jewish community in Bangor. It's a fraction of the size it used to be. We've tried to capture a small fraction of a tremendously rich history.

77:15 NM: He's correct. The decrease of the community size is my main concern. Even with the small community they are running educational and entertainment programs today, thanks to the endowment.