



Morris and Rebecca Robinson of Lisbon Falls, a prominent Jewish couple, will share their family's traditional Seder meal tonight (Holy Thursday) with 100 Catholics at SS Cyril and Methodius Church. Seated at the head table, the couple will conduct the ceremony just as they would in their own home — leading the prayers, lighting the festival lights and explaining the traditional Jewish ceremony with their Catholic friends and neighbors. Fr. Edward Gates, pastor, explained that he and several members of the parish were spurred into action this year when the Jewish holiday coincided with Maundy Thursday, when Catholics celebrate Christ's Last Supper. The Seder meal will begin right after sunset tonight. Pictured above (l to r) are Morris and Rebecca Robinson, Father Gates and Marian Kazimer, co-chairman of the program. (Don Hinckley photo)

The Singer-Robinson Family

The Robinson family followed men like Frank Gutman, a nonpracticing Jew who came to Lisbon Falls just before the Civil War, started a mill at age nineteen, and went back to Saxony, Germany. He returned as agent of the Worumbo Mill for he was very highly skilled in the manufacture of woolens in Germany, Scotland, and England. Gutman left a fine reputation as "a man of great integrity and high ideals, both in business and private life." The mill grew into a large plant covering several blocks. His son Walter succeeded him when he died in 1918. The grandchildren are now Protestants.

Harry Ginsburg came during Gutman's tenure and was equally successful. He began in a "rent" in 1880, but by 1889 he built a whole row of stores called the "Ginsburg Block." Two years later he built another block of stores on the other side of Main Street. These buildings were destroyed in 1901 by a citywide fire. His beautiful Queen Anne residence is now owned by heirs of Gustave Pienter.

According to a pamphlet titled, *Lisbon, The History of a Small Maine Town*, Mr. Ginsburg was "a man of remarkable ability." He sold his business to William Rosenberg in 1910 and moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he established a large department store called The Harvard Bazaar.

Rosenberg died in the flu epidemic during World War I, but his family carried on his business and also left a good reputation.

They were in business in 1927 when the Robinsons opened a clothing store, and Alfred Rosenberg, the son who remained, retired at the same time the Robinsons retired in 1977.

Who are the Robinsons? Morris and Rebecca Robinson, when I spoke with them, were in their seventies. They are the spokesmen for the poor, the illiterate, the helpless in Lisbon Falls since their retirement from business. They write to Augusta for neighbors who do not receive their checks for state or federal entitlements. They give money to various causes to relieve people in need. They even conducted a Passover service in SS Cyril and Methodius Church at the request of Father Edward Gates and Marian Kazimer. The head table held all the traditional items as Morris shared the Jewish ceremony with 100 Polish and Czech Slavic neighbors. The Maine papers carried a picture of the Robinsons and the priest with Mrs. Kazimer, showing Morris conducting the service.

When Rebecca's father, Max Singer, came to his older brother Abraham from Lithuania, he was sixteen years old. Abraham had served his apprenticeship to become a merchant by peddling throughout central Maine and was in business in a clothing store in Lewiston. He gave Max the usual basket of "Kuddle-Muddle" (notions) and told him to go from door to door until he learned to speak English. Max not only learned English in evening school, he fell in love with the wide-open spaces and people of Maine. He was not put off by the cold reception uneducated immigrants received from the established German Jews like Ehrenfried. Abraham prospered in Lewiston and opened a clothing store in the Bowdoin College town of Brunswick. After Max married Bessie Gould in Somerset, New Hampshire, they worked in the Brunswick store.

In 1900 there were about twelve Jewish families in Brunswick. In Bath, ten miles away, there were more Jews, and because they had a synagogue, Jews from Brunswick, Lisbon, and Lisbon Falls went to Bath for the High Holy Days. All were devout Orthodox Jews who tried to observe the Mosaic laws by buying kosher meat in Portland or Bangor, praying and resting on the Sabbath, hiring a Hebrew teacher for the children, and preserving the European *shtetl* culture. For instance the man who came from Portland to conduct services during the High Holy Days was not a rabbi, but he knew more Hebrew than the congregation. He came for twenty-five dollars and "days"; different families gave him shelter and

food for the ten days. Teachers, often slaughterers as well, were paid very little. A *shochet* earned five cents per chicken for kosher slaughtering. Most teachers impatiently slapped children who asked questions or were not attentive. One of the best teachers was a Bowdoin student. He was fired when someone saw him riding a bicycle on the Sabbath. Gabriel Showat had to go to Colby College as a result and later became a successful doctor. One such layman was the first Jewish undertaker in Portland. Everyone knew what he meant when he prayed for a good year!

Isaac Mack was so ashamed that his pregnant paralytic wife had not gone to the mikva he left Bath and moved to Brunswick. She had not observed the Jewish law requiring a ritual bath which the Jewish bride took before her wedding, at the end of her menstrual period, and after delivering a child. He was only a collector of rags, but he raised two families. His second wife brought three children, too. He had his share of grief. His two handsome stepsons engaged in a get-rich-quick scheme (the Page and Shaw Chocolate Company stock swindle) that involved the life savings of teachers and priests and ended with a two-year prison term for the one who was caught. Then his oldest daughter, Eva, refused all suitors because she loved the stepbrother who disappeared and remained unmarried.

One phenomenon common in all the Maine Jewish communities was the constant stream of schnorrers, *luftmenschen*, or beggars. Many of these men were the embodiment of chutzpah—gall, outrageous self-worth, brazen—they all apply. One such schnorrer was known as "Jakie the Jew" to residents of Bangor, Rumford, Brunswick, Lewiston, Lisbon Falls, and Portland. One day he came to Morris Robinson's home in Bangor during the pre-Passover season. He ate eighteen large matzo balls and looked up as if he wanted more. "I'll have to make more," said Mrs. Robinson. "That's all right—take your time. I need a rest," he replied.

In every town there were concerted efforts to take care of the beggars. In Bath the Sisterhood strained out the worthy. When a black Jew came for help, Mr. Petlock, the caretaker, took him to the bathroom to see if he was circumcised. For the most part, Jews believed the poor man was a child of God who had been unfairly disinherited from his patrimony. Therefore, he was not an object of pity but a man denied an adequate living, and

charity rectified the failure of the community. The story is told about a businessman who gave a beggar less than his usual amount with the lament that business had been bad that year. "So why should I suffer?" he replied. "When there are hungry to feed, naked to clothe, and orphans to support, funds are not lavished on a synagogue."

In ancient times each Jew was expected to contribute one-tenth of his income. In fact, it was so blessed to give that in the second century devout Jews were giving too much. The rabbinical council issued a decree forbidding any Jew to devote more than one-fifth of his wealth to charity. In the Talmud it is written that the door which does not open to the poor will open to the physician.

Tuberculosis and polio were frequent causes of death. In the Gold family in Brunswick, a son died of polio. Jews who were still poor gathered fifty dollars to bury the child in the Jewish cemetery in Portland.

Pesach (Passover) was a special holiday. Families who ordinarily went to Lewiston for meat, sweet butter, and rye bread bought chicken fat to substitute for butter. Mead (an alcoholic beverage made from fermented honey and water) took the place of milk. The Robinson family in Brunswick looked forward to a box containing oranges, matzo, kosher Pesachdika hot dogs, salami, and macaroons that an aunt always sent from Boston.

The High Holy Days were once celebrated in the Red Men Hall in Bath. That year the holidays came during the World Series. The men took the newspaper to keep up with the games but paid for it after the holidays. Women, as usual in Orthodox synagogues, were hidden behind a curtain, and men were praying earnestly, when the children, supposedly waiting in the anteroom of the fraternal lodge, whooped and hollered into the main room in Indian costumes, just as men were asking God for good health and material wealth for their children.

One couple in Lewiston was not content to wait for God's largess. When \$10,000 was offered to anyone who would ride around the world on a bicycle, the parents left their two children in a convent and took off. The children were admonished not to pray. The Jews took them out for the Jewish holidays until the parents returned. Even a girl who was sent to the State School for Girls after a conviction for shoplifting came home for the Jewish holidays.

Their minority status forced the Jews to demand high standards of behavior in school and high grades from their children. Any infraction of the "law" reflected on the whole Jewish community. Many first-generation Jews became doctors, lawyers, accountants, and businessmen—if not the first, then often in the second generation. Although most Russian Jews came to the slum of Brunswick—Water Street or the Landing—even rag pickers maintained clean homes decorated with crisp white curtains. There were dealers in second-hand furniture who traded with college boys and provided clothes-cleaning and pressing services.

They sent their children to New York or Boston where matchmakers arranged marriages. Another custom was to welcome Jewish young men who traveled in groups and bring them in to meet their daughters. Rebecca Robinson's daughter met her husband, a professor at Bowdoin, in Lisbon Falls, but she was married in a hotel in Old Orchard Beach. The Robinsons still recall with wonder that the cost per guest was only \$1.50 twenty-five years ago, including the orchestral

One peddler was visiting with his matched bride of four months when she complained of violent pain. Dr. Grant, the general practitioner, examined her and announced she would soon deliver a baby. The peddler had been duped, but he loved his wife. When she agreed to give up the child, the marriage continued as before.

Not all peddlers enjoyed storekeeping. Rebecca's father, Max Singer, loved farming and farmers. They were hungry for company, and he enjoyed their talk. They appreciated peddlers who brought them much needed clothing and implements. At times he extended credit until the harvest was in and happily took chickens, vegetables, and fruit in lieu of money.

Despite the custom of intermarriage among first cousins, Rebecca could remember only one retarded child. He was sent to Pineland Center when he was an adult. Meshuge—outlandish behavior—yes! One of her nieces refused to accept the opinion of many doctors that the sight in one eye could not be restored. She called her aunt to have the rabbi pray for her. She'd show those doctors!

Although by 1880 Maine (the first state to prohibit the sale of intoxicating liquor) had been "selling more wet goods than dry goods," there are no records of Jews as sellers of alcohol. The

European tradition of avoiding excess imbibing of liquor because "shicker is a goy" (drunkards by definition must be non-Jews) was carried into America with mother's milk. The reason given by writers that the severe cold made people drinkers did not apply to the peddlers. In Portland Mrs. Caroline M. Sivert smashed the bar where her drunkard husband left his wages. She made hash of the bottles, glasses, and bar. Her fine of ten dollars and costs were paid by a temperance society. Evidently the women who took care of the families of drunkards and maintained schools for their children did more than sympathize with the victims of alcoholism. They could not stop the "rum breaks" in the mills or shipyards, however. The records of 1830 show fifteen distilleries and 500 licensed dealers. In a population of 400,000, 10,000 of them were "beastly drunk"—7,000 were heads of families, 500 were women, 100 were convicts in state prisons, hundreds were dying of delirium tremens, and 1,500 paupers were created by drink. Some celebrations demanding whiskey were a ship launching, a barn raising, and an ordaining of a minister. A regular rum ration at 11 A.M. and 4 P.M. was given in the woods to loggers and on the farms to millers and workers in the hayfields. Then there were the Fourth of July celebrations! In Portland, Neal Dow's house and barns were burned and his orchards ruined when he succeeded in having a strong prohibition law passed in 1849.

When the Robinsons came to Lisbon Falls, they lived in a "rent" (Maine designation for a rented dwelling) among the Germans and Slavs. Two of their neighbors were fighting over their children. The German mother called the other a "Bohunk." "That's not nice to call someone a name," said Rebecca. The woman looked at her in amazement and said, "I didn't know Jews were Catholics. I thought you were a Protestant!" Today Jews and non-Jews are cordial to each other.

Mrs. Robinson thinks the social climate began to change when Jewish children attended the public schools. At first girls did not go to high school—only boys were expected to earn a living. But with the advent of Jewish athletes like her son and scholarly types (including a man who served as president of Bowdoin College) came acceptance of Jews as a cultured people.

Although the German Jews intermarried as a way of life, among Russian Jews intermarriage was so severely attacked that many Jews did not marry at all. Indeed, Mrs. Robinson's sister, Goldie Singer, who was payroll supervisor in the Bath Iron Works

for thirty-four years and is now in the personnel department at Bowdoin College, and her brother, Judge Joseph Singer in Brunswick, never married. There were common-law arrangements, of course, and all those farmer's daughter jokes do have a foundation in truth. Maybe this could have been avoided if these Jews had taken vacations in Old Orchard Beach. Nicknamed "Matchmaker's Heaven" it started with a boarding house and expanded to the Hotel Lafayette under the wise management of the Gookovsky family. At one time three hotels flourished for kosher families who wanted heavenly marriages.

In Biddeford Morris Robinson's younger brother, Sam, another bachelor, who worked for his older brother for twenty-five years, was so oblivious to material wealth that he didn't realize he was not covered by Social Security until the brother died. The Lord would provide! It turned out the Robinsons had to substitute for the Lord when he died.

Sam always helped poor students and schnorrers. One old man, a pencil seller, had been evicted because he could not keep himself clean. Sam took him to the public bath, gave him new clothes, and found a room for him. He appealed to the Jewish community to pay his doctor bill. For years he performed this service, and when the man lay on his deathbed, he called the man's sister. She could not possibly come. However, when Sam found bank accounts totaling \$30,000, she flew in from Michigan. Sam's suggestion that she make a gift to the Jewish community was ignored.

The Robinsons are quite content to live in their large house and welcome visits from their children and grandchildren. One grandchild married an Italian and is living in Florida. They have spent time in Florida, too, but do not enjoy travel as much as they did when Morris could drive. All the merchants gave the Robinsons a large banquet when they retired.

They regret not asking many questions of their deceased neighbor when she was an active genealogist. She told them many times that she rarely traced a family that did not have at least one Jewish ancestor.