

There are few details available about the lives of our earliest known ancestors. Reuben, who was born circa 1823, presided with his wife, Soshe Esther, over a family of at least seven children born over a period of twenty-three years. The two sources that mention his lineage indicate that ancestors named Yankev and Neshe figured in his background, as his parents or grandparents. There is also evidence that Reuben's paternal grandfather was Nathan, a name Reuben conferred upon his eldest son. (Reuben named his second son Yankev. The custom of naming the eldest son after the paternal grandfather was popular in Europe, thus it is possible that Reuben's father was Nathan and Yankev his grandfather. If Reuben's father was alive at the time of the birth of Reuben's first son, it would preclude this naming; it is also possible that Yankev was Reuben's eldest son and Nathan his second son. Although a family tradition discussed below implies that this may have been the case, the ages of Yankev's children suggests that he was younger than Nathan.) It is probable that Maishe Alperowitz, a lumber man from Sosenka who married Reuben and Soshe Esther's eldest daughter, Merke, was Reuben's brother. It is also probable that Chivia Alperowitz Fine, the mother of two daughters who married Merke's youngest sons, was Reuben's sister. There was also another Alperowitz family in Sosenka (a brother and two sisters); given the size and ethnic mixture of the community, as well as other factors, it is quite possible that these were siblings of Reuben as well. (See Appendix Two for a discussion about these relationships.)

A letter written in the 14th century recorded the history of Reuben's ancestors who left Germany in the earliest waves of Jewish immigration to Lithuania. This document also instructed that it be passed from generation to generation through the eldest son of successive families. It ultimately reached the hands of Yankev Alperowitz, who, like each of his ancestors, added inscriptions to it; and then finally passed to his son, Eliohu. Yankev is thought to be Reuben's second son and Eliohu appears to be the second of Yankev's sons. Perhaps Yankev retained the letter after Nathan's departure for America. Likewise, the letter may have fallen to Eliohu after the departure of his brother, Samuel H., or (as one descendant believed) Eliohu may have been Yankev's eldest son.¹⁹

Almost nothing is known about Soshe Esther. The only clue to her background is that a sister, Neshe, wed Chaim Kappellowitz of Dokscyze (circa 1861) and among their children was Yankev, the husband of Reuben and Soshe Esther's second daughter, Chivia Alperowitz.²⁰

Reuben's prestige in Sosenka must have been considerable for he has been described as the wealthiest man in town and the owner of the largest house - which was outfitted with the unheard of luxury of a copper sink. One source stated that he was occupied as a surveyor-assessor, evaluating timber properties and then managing harvests by selecting those trees ready for cutting; however, the circumstances of his life, particularly the large commitments to the ongoing financial support of sons-in-law and grandchildren (see below) and the accounts of various descendants suggests that he was a man of more substantial means than such an occupation would provide. It is probable that he employed his professional skills and relationships in forestry to operate as a



Samuel M. Cohen in Lithuania. He emigrated in 1892 but had a hard time convincing Dora of Bangor's attractions. (Courtesy of Sadye Cohen Harris) *Right:* Merke Alperowitz, circa 1913. Despite her formidable look she was described as a sweet tempered and indulgent grandmother. (Courtesy of Miriam Steinberg Snyder)

timber merchant, for evidence indicates that he was a member of the merchant class.²¹

A statute issued in 1851 divided Jews into five classes: Guild merchants, petty traders, artisans, laborers, and those with no definite occupation.²² There were also *raznochintsy* - professionals - such as doctors and engineers. Membership in the merchant guilds, which had been formed prior to this time, was desirable in that members paid reduced taxes and, until 1874, were exempt from military service. By 1851 the merchant guilds included over 27,000 Jewish members in the Pale, nearly 96 percent of whom belonged to the Third Guild. Presumably Reuben was a member of the Second Guild (the Third Guild was eliminated in 1863) as the ranks of the First Guild, which permitted unrestricted rights of residence, were filled with the wealthiest traders. First Guild merchants were required to have paid a business tax of 800-1,000 rubles per year for at least five years prior to 1882 simply to qualify for the limited privileges extended after the advent of the Temporary Laws - a sum far greater than a man from a place such as Sosenka would seem likely to be in a position to pay. (To put these figures in perspective, the entire agricultural income from the nearby estate of Starzynki amounted to 3,796 silver rubles in 1865.)

Among Reuben and Soshe Esther's children at least Nathan, Merke, Chivia, Sarah, Simcha and Leah lived in Sosenka, and all were apparently born there. That there were more children is suggested by the substantial age difference between the eldest and the youngest as well as the total number of offspring, which by 19th century standards was rather low. It is most likely that other children may not have survived to adulthood, for there is no evidence to suggest that others remained in Russia or emigrated to different countries.²³ Apparently all of the children of Merke, Chivia and Sarah were born in Sosenka as were four of Nathan's seven children; of the others, two were born in Dolhinow and the youngest in Maine. Simcha's first child, Reuben, (b.1892, later Americanized to Robert) was probably born in Sosenka as well; the rest of his offspring were born in Maine. All of Yankev's children were born in Dunilowicze.

The Alperowitzes remained in Sosenka during a time when the wholesale expulsion of Jews from townlets and villages was occurring throughout the Pale. This may have been due to another government edict: only Jews who had settled in villages prior to 1882 were allowed to remain there, but those wishing to relocate from towns to villages were prohibited from doing so. To force the Jews into the towns the government banned further leasing of real estate and houses to them and in 1887 rescinded their right to move from one village to another.²⁴

Among other statutes that had a direct effect upon the Alperowitz family was the conferment of a surname, for according to KAG the original family name was Mazar and this was "changed by a Czarist official in [Isidor Alpert's] grandfather's day - Reuben Alperowitz, a timber man..." That two of Reuben and Soshe Esther's children, and the descendants of a third, adopted the Cohen name upon immigration to America may be accounted for by the relatively brief period of time that the family carried the Alperowitz name.

When and where the first surname was established is unknown, however, when the time came for Jews to assume permanent family names, a popular

procedure was to draw on their tribal lineage, which in this case is kohanic.²⁵ According to one authority on the subject, because "many government officials frowned upon or actually forbade the use of any Hebrew in the naming process many Jews created names out of combinations of letters that were significant to them alone. One advantage of such creations was that it afforded the opportunity for Jews to preserve the Hebrew element of the name without disclosing the Hebrew word."²⁶ Under these circumstances, priestly descent could be indicated by several combinations or abbreviations of letters including the contraction of the Hebrew *mizera Aaron*, meaning "from the seed of Aaron" resulting in the name Maza or Mazar.²⁷

If the Mazar name was first assumed when the family lived under Russian jurisdiction, perhaps a government statute (issued in 1804 and reiterated in 1845) requiring Jews to adopt surnames was responsible. The assignment of the Alperowitz name, on the other hand, may have been based on Reuben's place of residence, particularly if he was living in or near Sosenka at the time. Sosenka's location a few miles east of the much larger town of Kurenets, where Alperowitz was the most popular family name, may explain the name change if Reuben was registered as a resident there. It has been estimated that as many as 30 percent of the Jews of Kurenets bore this name simply through residence or registry there, though most of the families were unrelated.²⁸

*

When the Alperowitz children reached the appropriate age it was the responsibility of Reuben and Soshe Esther (with, perhaps, the assistance of a matchmaker) to see them married to suitable mates.²⁹ That wives and husbands were not to be found in Sosenka almost goes without saying, for the opportunities were necessarily limited in a community of that size. Consequently, the sons all married outsiders: Nathan's bride was the daughter of Rabbi Kramer of that vicinity (possibly Dolhinow); Yankev traveled to Dunilowicze, where his wife Itka apparently resided; and Simcha selected a bride, Dora Koppelowitz, from the nearby village of Ilya.

Finding husbands for the daughters may have been tougher and probably involved lengthy negotiations with the parents of the grooms over matters such as the size of the dowry and the length of time that the newlyweds and their children could expect to be supported by the bride's father. Support included room and board for an agreed upon period of time, usually fifteen years; but it was not at all unusual, depending upon the occupation of the son-in-law, for the support period to run indefinitely. The more prosperous the bride's father, the more expensive the proposition was likely to become. (Not everyone thought that this custom, called *kest*, was a good idea; Rabbi Manasseh ben Joseph of Ilya was an outspoken critic, regarding *kest* as counterproductive.) It was under these circumstances that mates were lined up for the daughters, including Maishe Alperowitz for Merke (apparently Reuben's brother - see Appendix Two); Yankev Kappelowitz from Dokscyze for Chivia; a rabbi, Aaron Alperowitz, for Sarah (this match probably included a "lifetime support clause" as rabbis were not expected to engage in income producing work other than what they received from their congregation; in Sosenka, this

could not have been anticipated to be much); and after two or three suitors were rejected, Barnet Anselowitz for Leah.

Reuben's death from cancer in 1890 must have been a catastrophic event for the family who appear to have been almost entirely dependent upon him for their living.³⁰ The consequences for Merke's family were particularly severe as her husband's death, which occurred during the same period of time, left her with several youngsters to raise with no means of support. With her father gone she might naturally look to her brothers for help, but Nathan had left for America in 1882, Simcha emigrated a short time later (1892), and Yankev had gone off to raise a family in Dunilowicze. This left the economic destiny of the family in the hands of Sarah's husband, who depended upon Reuben for his living, and Chivia's husband, Yankev Kappellowitz, who had probably worked with his father-in-law. Soshe Esther spent another thirteen years in Sosenka before she died, circa 1903.

*

NATHAN was the eldest of the Alperowitz children, born October, 1844. He married Rosa Kramer (b.1840), the daughter of Rabbi Meyer Kramer, around 1864. According to one of their grandchildren, Nathan was determined to "marry tall" and Rosa, who was over six feet in height, qualified. The couple lived in Sosenka where their first two children, Sarah and Max, were born in 1865 and 1867. Simon and Jacob were born in Dolhinow in 1869 and 1873 (perhaps Rosa's family resided there), whereas their fifth and sixth children, Ann and Samuel N., were born in Sosenka in 1878 and 1883. Louis was born 1886 in Maine.³¹

As is the case with his siblings, practically nothing is known of Nathan's activities prior to his emigration from Russia. Because of his residence in Sosenka it is presumed that he worked in forestry with his father.

Nathan's relocation to America was triggered by two critical events. The assassination of Alexander II in 1881 caused a series of pogroms that resulted in the deaths of nearly 50,000 people and although this and subsequent waves of violence bypassed the area surrounding Sosenka, no locale was regarded as safe. The fact that Nathan's sons were approaching draft age also figured prominently in the decision to leave. The pathway of officially sanctioned emigration, however, was not yet available. Until the 1880's very few people left Russia, for the tsars, who considered Russian citizenship a privilege, had enforced rigorous laws limiting emigration. From 1870 to 1881 no more than three thousand people per year were allowed to leave the country; but a gradual relaxation began to occur and 1882 counted nearly ten thousand Russians entering the United States. Among these were Nathan Alperowitz and his son, Max.

The exact circumstances of the family's departure have been obscured with the passage of time, but this much has been remembered: Nathan arrived in Boston in 1882 with the intention of settling there. He found work but was harrassed to the point that he packed up the few belongings he had, returned to the train station and purchased a ticket for the farthest destination north that his money would take him. This was Bangor, Maine.