



Nathan Cohen inscribed the birth dates of each child on the bottom of successive pages of *The Book of the Prophets*. There are numerous other inscriptions in the book, which was apparently a gift to the original owner, whose identity is uncertain: an end sheet includes the words "to my friend Yakov and his wife." Perhaps it belonged to Nathan's grandfather, who, it seems was named Yankev (the diminutive of the Hebrew name, Yakov). The book was handed down to Nathan, who apparently as a youth wrote, "this book belongs to Nussan Ha-Kohen" in several places (Nussan was Nathan's Hebrew name, whereas Ha-Kohen means "the priest" and refers to the family's tribal descent). From Nathan the book went to his eldest son, Max, who recorded "this book belongs to the boy Menachem Mendel" and the quixotic "Menachem Mendel Nussan Alpert." "Ben" (son of) could logically be inserted before Nussan; Aaron Alperowitz also used the name Alpert in Russia. Yet another owner wrote "this book belongs to Moshe Mayer of Dolhinow."

הולדת בן
הולדת בת
הולדת בן

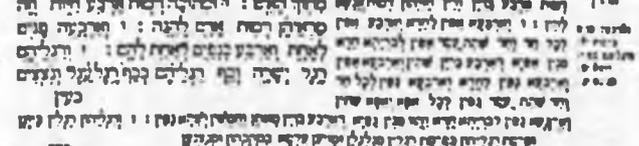


הולדת בת שרה בת יום שני בלילה כ"ב שבט ה'תרמ"ו
 הולדת בן מנחם מנדל בן יום ראשון בלילה כ"ב שבט ה'תרמ"ו
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Pages from Book of the Prophets with the Hebrew inscriptions (left) "birth of a daughter Sarah, born Tuesday morning, the day after Succoth, 1865 in Sosenska;" and (right) "birth of a son Menachem Mendel (Max), Sunday morning, May 8, 1867 in Sosenska." The sixth inscription reads "birth of a son Shmuel (Samuel), Thursday in the morning, fifth day of June 1883 in Sosenska."

אז אבתי נולדה לי ביום
 יום א' ט"ו שבט ה'תרמ"ו

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(The account of Nathan's experience in the "big city" was told by several people and this provided the reason why he left; however, it is probable that his settlement in Bangor was less accidental than this story implies. At the time of his arrival, Bangor was the second largest lumber port in the world and Nathan certainly must have believed that his lumber background could have been useful there.)

Simon was apparently smuggled out separately, for he traveled steerage to the U.S. on his own. After Nathan had been gone for almost two years his eldest daughter, Sarah, married Hyman Epstein, whose family was in the lumber business in Dokszyce. Soon after their marriage, Hyman left for Bangor and was followed a short time later by Sarah, who traveled with her brother-in-law, Harry Epstein. Rosa and the rest of the family left in 1884; lingering accounts of a midnight border crossing indicate that their departure, like most others of that time, was unofficial. Over the next two decades Nathan's sister Leah and brother Simcha would emigrate, as did eighteen nieces and nephews.

Nathan left Russia an Alperowitz and became, upon his arrival in America, a Cohen. His establishment of the new surname may have been as much a result of circumstance as intent. He had traveled to America with a friend whose name was Cohen and when this individual gave that name to the immigration officials, Nathan, who was also a kohen, gave the same name. It was a common practice among immigrants to give their tribal names to officials, as they often did not identify with the names that had been assigned by the governments they had just left behind. It is also probable that Nathan considered the Alperowitz name dispensable given the conditions under which it originated.

The adoption of the Cohen name was followed by Nathan's brother, Simcha, who arrived in 1892 and their nephew, Samuel H., who arrived in Maine in 1889; however, Isidor Alpert (b.1886), the youngest of Maishe and Merke's children and the first to arrive in America in 1904, retained the Alperowitz name. Perhaps his hereditary name was more meaningful to him because he was a second generation Alperowitz and the Cohen name less so because of his more secular orientation. KAG noted that her father "cast off religious customs when he came to America" and although he "was a kohen, traditionally the descendants of the high priests of Israel, with certain religious privileges still reserved to them, he never mentioned it to his children."³²

MERKE, born 1845, was the eldest of four daughters and thus assumed the responsibility of helping raise her younger brothers and sisters. She married Maishe Alperowitz who was a forester, most likely in association with Reuben, and had nine children, five of whom emigrated. Maishe died when Isidor, the youngest, was three or four years old which left Merke to raise, with the help of her eldest daughter Shprintze, at least three remaining children. (Later it was Merke who took charge of the gravely ill Shprintze's daughters, with whom she lived until 1913 when Shprintze finally succumbed to cancer.) The family remained in Sosenka where, according to KAG, they were "very poor;"

so poor that Leah (b.1881) "one time was sick for six weeks with no one attending to her."

The responsibility for supporting the family fell, in part, to thirteen year old Simon (b.1876, known as Shimsel), due to the fact that his older brother, Mendel, had already married and moved away. Obligated to abandon his dream of pursuing a life in religion, Shimsel instead became a logger on the Viliya. After his marriage to Leah Ginsburg in 1903, Merke resided with the couple who soon added two children to the family: Esther (b.1904) and Hyman (b.1905). During this time Shimsel continued to work on the river until the organization of a logger's union precipitated his emigration. The lumber companies naturally opposed such activities and when it was mistakenly suggested that Shimsel was one of the organizers rather than simply a participant, he was warned by friends to disappear or face arrest. He selected a hideout across the river and returned at night to see his wife and mother, but the possibility of discovery mounted with each visit. His brother Isidor had been in America for two years and Israel had just left when it was decided that his family should leave as well. The inability to pay for more than one passage meant that Leah and the infants would have to stay behind until enough money was saved, and it was under these depressing circumstances that Shimsel sailed on the *American* from Liverpool on June 28, 1906. To support themselves, Leah and Merke established a tiny shop which they operated in a small town; perhaps this was Smorgon, for Merke lived there for a number of years until her death (see below). After a year Shimsel was able to send enough money for the family to join him.

Shimsel arrived in Philadelphia on July 10 and proceeded directly to Bangor where Isidor had moved from New York just two months before. He secured a horse and team and operated as a peddler for a few years until a confectionery shop was established at 355 Main Street. After Leah arrived, several more children were born, including Morris (b.1908), Abraham (b.1911), Paul (b.1913) and Miriam (b.1916), prior to the family's move to Boston in 1922.

Merke's eldest child, Shprintze (b.1865), married Abraham Maskind and raised six children in Smorgon: Sylvia (b.1895), Lena (b.1900), Lillian (b.1905), and Esther (circa 1910). Two sons, one born between Lena and Lillian, and the other born between Lillian and Esther, died before reaching adolescence. At first the Maskinds lived with Merke in Smorgon; later, after they established their own home, Merke resided with them and took over the management of the household once Shprintze became bedridden. (Exactly when these living arrangements commenced is unclear, except that it was some time after Shimsel's wife had left for America in 1907). Shprintze's husband, Abraham, was out of work and when his brothers-in-law in Bangor heard of their sister's illness they began sending money to help bring the family to Maine. They traveled in two groups with the pair of eldest daughters emigrating first. After Shprintze's death in 1913 Abraham left for Bangor with Lillian and Esther; however, he died shortly thereafter in 1916. The daughters lived with Leah, Isidor, Shimsel and Israel for a time and then moved to Wisconsin to live with Maskind uncles and aunts. Sylvia, Lena and Esther later settled in Chicago and Lillian in Philadelphia, where they established families.

Merke's eldest son, Mendel (b.1869), pursued a scholastic life until he was approached by Baruch Kopkind, a wealthy brewery owner from Borisov, who was looking for a suitable mate for his daughter, Rusha. Sylvia Alpert Nyer described the circumstances of her parents' arranged marriage this way:

Mother was the oldest of four children...born into a well-to-do, German family. Her father, a handsome strong young man, made a success early in life, in the brewery business. He fell in love with a beautiful young singer who had violet blue eyes and natural reddish-blond hair, both of which mother inherited, as well as an exceptional voice.

When mother turned eighteen, her mother suggested an Academy for the study of music, perhaps for an opera career. Her father, strong-willed, opposed it, claiming that form of profession would end up as a wasted life, as he saw it. Mother, as an obedient daughter, felt she had no right to inject her own feelings. Not that mother's father was an observant Jew, but he believed: "from opera stars you get news clippings - not grandchildren..."

At the Dolhinov Yeshive, mother's father, Baruch Kopkind, found out that there was a brilliant marriageable-aged scholar, who lived in Sossinke [sic], about 20 kilometers from Dolhinov. Mr. Kopkind, my grandfather whom I never met, traveled to Sossinke. Several surprises awaited him. First, Sossinke was nothing but a hamlet; second, the people there were small in stature; third, the inhabitants were clannish, proud and interrelated. (and...Strange as it may seem, almost all of the people of Sossinke were Kohanim...) To my grandfather's surprise he found the young man, Zalmon Mendel, very personable and a little taller than the average.

...Zalmon Mendel Alperovitch, readily accepted the proposal to marry Rusha Kopkind, the daughter of a rich man. The first time Rusha and Zalmon Mendel met was at their engagement party in Dolhinov, to which the whole Jewish community was invited. The first exchange of furtive glances between my mother and father to be convinced them both that mutual affection would be the firm foundation of their marriage to be, not too long thereafter.³³

Arranged marriages in Sosenska were not always successful. According to Sylvia, Rusha Kopkind's youngest brother Yosafe (Joseph),

seeing how well his sister...made out in her marriage with a Sossinker, hired a "Schatchon" - matchmaker - to travel to Sossinke, to search out a religious wife for him. The matchmaker returned with a choice of two. Both were poor. But the one that was not so good looking, with a long nose, was a Kohen Rabbi's daughter... That was prestige. They were married; they had three children. Poor Yosafe could stand it no longer...his wife was a screaming nag, she was stingy, short and ugly.

Ike arranged for his brother Joseph to come to America. Joseph, without experience, worked in a sweatshop where he caught TB. Joseph came back to his home in Sossinke. His wife threw him out.³⁴



Aaron Alperowitz, Sosenka's rabbi, and Sarah Alperowitz. "The dream of a wealthy merchant was to marry his daughter to an outstanding scholar..." (Courtesy of Joel Alpert)