

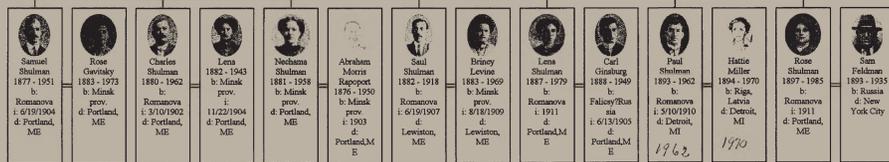
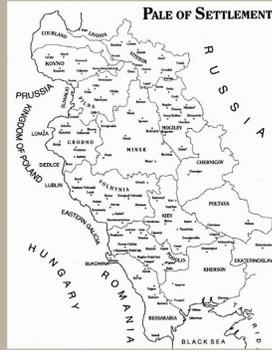
JOURNEY

How was it that Jews came to Maine? What attracted them to this distinctly isolated, if picturesque, corner of the United States?

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Jews in Poland, Russia, Hungary, Lithuania and Latvia suffered under tyranny, deprivations and pogroms. Gradually word reached them, through newspaper articles, agency publications and letters from family members, about the promise of America.

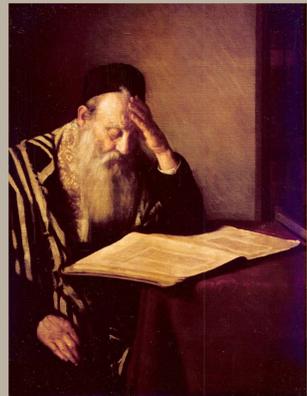


Maps of Eastern Europe



A branch of Portland resident Judith Halpert's family tree, tracing her maternal grandfather's line

After securing funds for carriage rides, rail passages and ship's tickets, hundreds of thousands of East European Jews followed an earlier wave of German Jewish immigrants. They traveled from small villages and large Jewish centers to major port cities, then embarked on ocean voyages – often suffering seasickness, indignities and cramped quarters in steerage class.



This portrait of Jacob Freeman was painted when he was still in Lithuania



The Weinstein, Coolberg and Wishnetski families of Rorbach, Ukraine

Some found their way to relatives or *landsmen* who had made the trip earlier and put down roots in Maine. Others fled unhealthy urban tenement districts. Some sought a climate or scale similar to what they had known in their European *shtetlach*. Perhaps some learned of the timber industry and coastal commerce in Maine. Others were relocated to the state from their port of entry by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.



Four 19th-century Bangor Jewish women

Kornetsky, Rosenberg and Tabachnick families in the early 20th century

The experiences of those early Maine Jews may be remote in time and memory, but they are key to this story. Not all of them stayed here – many moved on to other U.S. and Canadian destinations – but the ones who planted roots in Maine exhibited qualities that subsequent Jewish Mainers have admired and emulated: resolve, resourcefulness, devotion to family, commitment to community.



Beth Israel (Bangor) board, 1913



Dedication at Beth Abraham (Bangor), 1933

These first-generation Maine Jews were poised between continuity and change. They strive to preserve cultural traditions in a context of American modernity, advancing technologies and popular entertainment. If their conservative dress and, often, long beards did not brand them as foreigners, limited English skills sometimes did. These speakers of Russian, Polish and Yiddish acquired American styles and American slang relatively quickly, but were sometimes reluctant to leave native tongues and *minhag* (custom) behind.



The Yiddish Globe Theater performed in Auburn in 1914



In 1938 Falk Ilowitski presented his son George Lewis with honorary member in the *Tarbut* (culture school) of their native Kosovo, Poland

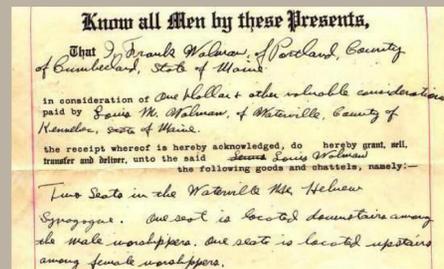


Hyman Rosenthal of Waterville reads the Yiddish Forward, 1945

For actively practicing Jews there were particular hurdles to overcome. Their challenges remain present-day realities for observant Jews outside of the Portland and Bangor metropolitan areas. Like Jews in Montana or Mississippi – in any U.S. state or country of the world where Jews and Jewish services are limited – they are forced to sacrifice, innovate or compromise in order to satisfy religious obligations.



Etz Chaim (Bacon Street shul) in Biddeford



Contract for seats at Beth Israel in Waterville



Original Congregation Beth Israel building, Old Orchard Beach

Sometimes conditions defy the will to sustain Judaism, but frequently, through initiative and creativity, committed Maine Jews reconcile faith and circumstances – recruiting sufficient co-religionists to form a minyan, obtaining food products that satisfy the laws of kashrut, securing human and financial resources to build synagogues or ritual baths, and expanding the Jewish social worlds of their children to ensure a strong Jewish future.

JCC dance group, 1952

Girls on *bimah*, Shaarey Tphiloh (Portland), 1938

Rabbi David Berent (Lewiston) and young friend visit with Sen. Margaret Chase Smith and LBJ, 1960s

