



*Isaac and Minazeesel Berliawsky with Anita, Nathan, Lillian, and Louise*

## **Nathan Berliawsky**

## **Louise Nevelson**

The Berliawskys came to Maine when Jewish peddlers dominated the business as the list of peddlers' licenses in the Maine archives shows. The page for 1891 shows Nathan Berliawsky among Isaac Abrams, L. Allen, Leon Arenson, Abraham Arenson, Elly Aransky, Simon, Albert, and Harry Benovitch of Houlton, Berre Bernstein, and Simon Dorfman. Ralph Grodjinski; the family of Epstein-Simon—Harris, Max, U., Morris, and Hyman; and the family of Max Slosbert—Bennett, Abram, and John appear on the 1896 page. Max Shapiro, the brothers Louis and Cyrus Shiro, G.H. Day, Elizabeth Moses of Eastport, Julius and Philip Levine of Waterville, Bernett J. Klein of Presque Isle, Simon Koshovsky of Ft. Kent, Isaac Wolper of Bangor, and Frank Wolman of Waterville are also named for 1896.

But by 1901 only Simon, Abe, and Julius Epstein bought the fifty dollars license, and the Bucklanick family from Lewiston—Auburn, L., Max, Barnett, and Bernard—is the large group. Isaac Mikelsky of Bath; Nathan and Charles Maloof of Bath; Jake, Bennett, and Max Schlosburg of Randolph; Schoel Silverstein of Caribou; Jules Slosberg of Gardiner; Joseph Slosberg of Lewiston; Mayor Wolman of Waterville; H. Simansky of Rumford Falls; Abram Shalit of Lewiston; and Morris Shemberg of Lubec also paid for licenses.

On the 1891 page the names Abdallah Akel, Ignazio Albarnise, Pharris Abdulla, C.G. Aldrich, Nazaria Beaupre, Hesse Bshura, Elizabeth Batchelder, W.M. Chamberlain, Vitale G. Chasses, and Rodney S. Gem show that there were Armenians and Lebanese and others active too.

Between 1887 and 1902, disabled soldiers and sailors were given licenses free.

When Nathan Berliawsky brought his brother, Isaac, to Waterville from Kiev, Russia, he expected the lad to start like he did, as a peddler. But Isaac, a Talmudic student was tired of the oppressive environment of religious life and wanted freedom and lots of room. A year later Isaac took off on his own. He went to Rockland where a prosperous Jewish community appeared to offer a more interesting life. In 1902 there were the Alperins, the Korinskys, the Crocketts, the Segals, the Pollacks, the Dondises, the Millers, and Rabbi Israel, who opened the first grocery. In the minutes of the synagogue, the duties of the rabbi included ritual slaughtering of animals, killing fowl, selling meat, leading religious services, teaching the children to read and write Hebrew, conducting bar mitzvahs and weddings, and performing circumcisions. When no rabbi was available, butchers filled in. The rabbi was not to kill any chickens for members delinquent in dues, and he would charge an extra five cents for meat to delinquent dues members.

Isaac Berliawsky was co-president of the congregation in 1932 with Isaac Gordon. In 1931 Berliawsky had given land to a breakaway group for a cemetery—he did not approve of the rules governing the original cemetery. The new cemetery has two Stars of David at the entrance and is administered by Nate Berliawsky's cousin, Sam Small.

Isaac found the twenty families crude by his standards. His grandfather had been in the lumbering and vodka business in Kiev, was decorated by the czar (who exempted all his

descendants from military service), and he had his own estate. He used to say that 200 Berliawskys lived on this estate and they were all educated.

Yet Isaac married a poor girl, Minazeezal, in Kiev. He was able to bring his wife and four children—Nathan, Lillian, Anita (Weinstein), and Louise (Nevelson)—to Rockland in 1904. His mother-in-law came to live with them later. Nathan remembered his grandmother as an ignorant, superstitious old woman who sent him to a Jewish farmer, Block, in Thomaston, to buy kosher milk. He hated her; he remembered her as an unmitigated nuisance when I interviewed him in his eighties. She chose to die in her own way; she was never ill. She asked Nathan's mother to give her a bath (her feet were cold), asked for her black silk dress, said "good-bye," and died at age eight-six. She had specified she wanted to lie in the old cemetery.

Isaac was fairly successful in real estate when the children were young. He was admired for his knowledge of Hebrew by Mr. Rosenberg, who lent him money to buy land when most banks were not lending money on land. The Rosenbergs were wealthy realtors; one son, Jesse, was the first Jew from Rockland to graduate from Harvard Law School.

When Nate died in September 1980, the *Portland Herald* devoted a three-column spread to his obituary. He had said that the bright people—engineers, doctors, dentists, artists, etc.—had all left Rockland. He named Edna St. Vincent Millay among them. Including himself, he used to say, "Only the culls are left."

Growing up in Rockland was not easy for an immigrant boy dressed in foreign clothes. In school Nathan was embroiled in many a fight with his classmates who called him a Jew as a challenge. They made it plain that he was entitled to privileges if he would fight for them. He quit in his second year in high school to sell newspapers and was able to manage his own magazine stand on what is now the Coast Guard station. He rowed out to sell his papers to boats anchored in the harbor. Later he expanded his business to a store "on the point."

As a midshipman in the navy during World War I, he came face to foot with Franklin Delano Roosevelt. As he climbed up the gangway, Roosevelt came down (in his capacity as Secretary of the Navy). Nate recalled, "He was tall and aristocratic." Nate was completely awed and still felt the power of the man years later when he saw him again in Rockland during World War II after the

Roosevelt rendezvous with Winston Churchill.

There were hard times after World War I. In a biography of Louise Nevelson, Nate's famous sister, Laurie Lisle stated he was a rum runner and slot machine (illegal) racketeer. He was not ostracized in the community because most people had a difficult time during the Depression, and they understood why he felt he had to do that. He was never arrested or investigated; the police were paid well.

Until he was fifty years old, Nate thought of himself as inferior to his peers—poorly educated, a foreigner, and a Jew who engaged in illegal business. When the Jaycees of Rockland awarded him the Fifth Annual District Award in 1962, he was completely surprised to learn he was an acceptable, respected member of the community.

With the help of Pete Isaacson of Depositors Trust Bank, Nate bought the Thorndike Hotel at a sheriff's auction in 1937. It had been a first-class hotel with 100 rooms, where he sold newspapers when he was a boy. It was shut down briefly on a false charge of selling liquor on Sunday, which some people thought was an example of anti-Semitism. When it reopened, Nate fed the poor from the kitchen and put up the islanders stranded by storms.

He also displayed Louise's art in the lobby, despite the local laughter at her creations. When the hotel developed an excellent dining room, it became popular with local judges and politicians; he often recommended candidates.

He loved the hotel. The upper floor was his home. When I saw him there, he had large pictures of his mother and sister Louise displayed prominently. Both were tall, beautiful, stylishly dressed women he was very proud of. He especially enjoyed meeting celebrities like Betty Davis and Henry Fonda. "Jane Fonda and her brother Peter attended a progressive school in Owl's Head, which accounted for her craziness." When Jews came to the desk apprehensive about staying in his "classy" hotel, Nate would utter a few words in Yiddish to see them relax and ask him how he ever found Maine. The Thorndike employed struggling artists in need of work. His sister Anita worked in the downstairs bar. His nephew Mike, Louise's son, worked in the hotel.

When his father lost his money and was too compassionate to collect the rent from his tenants, Nate took on the role of family supporter. He sent money to Louise, who had painted him three years before. He overstaffed the hotel with down-on-their-luck

artists, lent money to Rockland people, and never pressed them for repayment. The hotel is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Nate was engaged to Alice Lymeburner, a non-Jew, for eleven years. He could not antagonize his parents by marrying her. Meantime, he supported his parents and his nephew Mike's family. In March of 1945 he bought an old brownstone house at 30th Street near Second Avenue for Louise in New York. Since the deed was in Anita's name, as assistant manager of the Thorndike, she felt it was her house, but Louise was too busy creating sculpture to entertain visitors. His mother, Anna (Minazeezel) Small Berliawsky, died three years before his father who died in October 1946. Nate's youngest sister, Lillian, married Ben Mildwoff and at age fifty, Nate married Ben's sister, Lillian, who was a buyer and designer in a department store. She and Mike opened a summer antique art frame and refinishing shop in Rockland. Mike sculpted while she ran the shop.

Nate felt "art was a stupid waste of time," but his kinship made him support Louise. He even advised her to give it up when she was thousands of dollars in debt. He continued to display her work and once again paid several thousand dollars for mahogany pedestals with her signature engraved on metal plates. He felt Mike, her son, owed him \$10,000 for money, meals, and various other expenses, and he expected him to tend bar at the hotel as well as donate some of his sculpture to repay him. Nate could not forget that a friend of his family, Scholom Aleichem, came from Europe in 1916 and said, "Louise is destined for greatness."

During his active business life, Nate served as president of the Chamber of Commerce and was a member of the Committee for Urban Renewal, representing Rockland in Canada where the group was served smoked whitefish and lox by the Minister of Transportation. For many years, he was director of the Maine Publicity Bureau and helped organize (and later became president) of the Mid-Coast Route 1 Association. He was also an active member of both the Lions' Club and B'nai B'rith.

Nate and Lillian were among the founders of the Maine Coast Artists Gallery and the Bay Chamber Concert group. Lillian continued her support of Andrew and Thomas Wolf, the teenagers who started Bay Chamber Concerts, after Nate's death, by donating thousand-dollar prizes to talented youngsters. She died February 24, 1993, in Camden, where she had an antique

book store for many years.

Nate was a friend of the composer Abe Chasin, who was a guest at the Thorndike. He knew Mrs. Curtis-Bok (later married to Ephram Zimbalist), who built the Rockport houses for the summer faculty of the Curtis Institute. He enjoyed the friendship of many of the musicians who performed in Rockport. The Berliawskys were supporters and active members of Adas Yeshuron Synagogue in Rockland.

Louise was working in an office when the brother of Charles Nevelson came in to buy sailing vessels. He was so enchanted by her good looks and sparkling personality, he sent his bachelor brother from New York to meet her. Charles was quite a bit older and Jewish, but he did not meet her mother's requirements. She said it was not a good match because Charles was old enough to be Louise's father. Louise had been encouraged to go to an art school and wanted the opportunity to study so much that she consented to marry Charles when he offered to send her to an art school for six months to see if she had any talent. They soon had a son, Michael, who lived with Nate and his family part of his childhood and lived with his father's family for a few years. Louise could not be a housewife and mother. She had been captain of her basketball team and encouraged to be an artist by a teacher, Miss Ann Cleveland. By 1931 she divorced Charles and brought Michael to Rockland to be raised by her sister.

Louise had a fine collection of jewelry (gifts from Charles), which she sold to finance her education with Heintz Hoffman in Germany. In addition to painting, sculpting, etching, and graphics, she studied drama, voice, and modern dance. Nathan remembered those early years were very hard for Louise, and he could help only by displaying her work in his hotel. She came back to New York during the depth of the Depression to work for the W.P.A., which she later credited with saving her life. Nate was able to buy some pieces a few years later, and she gave him a cat sculpture he admired. She smoked cigars when women were just beginning to smoke cigarettes in public. A special room was assigned to her after she became famous at the Samoset Hotel (the posh hotel on the mid-coast), but she refused to stay there when the new manager dismantled the work of the deceased Maine artist Bernard Langlais. She had been a friend of the Langlaises for years.

"With the very active assistance of Nate Berliawsky, I went to see Louise at her studio in 1977, shortly after becoming director

of the Farnsworth Museum. A retrospective within the limits of the Farnsworth's space was agreed upon. It was a huge success," recalled Mariusa Piladeau, the director for more than a decade. She generously gave many terra cottas while the show traveled to Palm Beach, Florida, and Scottsdale, Arizona. The 1979 Farnsworth show opened on her eightieth birthday. In September 1985, on her eighty-fifth birthday, she exhibited "The Gift of 1985: The Art of Louise Nevelson at the Farnsworth." For this show she displayed jewelry and the gold throne and fabric she created for the opera *Orfeo and Euridice*. She donated most of this show to the museum that had purchased a large segment of "Dawn's Wedding Feast," the white wall sculpture.

She gave the Farnsworth a large portion of her personal, business, and artistic papers. Nate had accumulated a collection of her early paintings and sculpture as well as art from her friends and contemporaries that were donated when he died. They were to be displayed in a separate gallery, the Nevelson Archives, that were completed in 1994, with the help of Lillian Berliawsky's legacy.

When Nate sold the hotel, not only the Farnsworth benefited. He gave Nevelson art to Colby College and the Penobscot Bay Medical Center, too. A Nevelson sculpture he gave to the Brooklyn Museum is now on exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. He had planned to create a Nevelson Square in Rockland like the Nevelson Square in New York. He recalled that when he transformed his dining room in 1974 into a Louise Nevelson Room, Louise came in a chauffeured Cadillac, turning down a Rockefeller party for Kissinger.

Lillian Berliawsky accompanied Louise to Europe on October 28, 1960, when the Galerie Daniel Cordier gave Louise her first one-woman exhibit in Europe. In 1961, Louise bought the building next to her home with help from her sister Lillian Mildwoof, whose husband became a successful glass manufacturer in New York.

A year later Louise sold a work to the Whitney Museum as well as to the Joseph Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C.

Louise owned a whole square block in New York. One building was originally a hospital. Nate said, "She worked very hard for her twenty million."

When Nate developed cancer of the colon, Louise helped him to be admitted to the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York. The cancer was arrested, but he died of heart

failure in 1980. Louise came to Rockland for the funeral, where she said, "It was the longest and most satisfying relationship of my life." She raised money and gave a sculpture to establish the Louise Nevelson Laboratory for Cancer Immuno Biology at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital.

Louise died on April 17, 1988, leaving an eighteen-million-dollar estate to her son, Mike, who is administering Sculptotek, Inc., the one hundred million dollars worth of art she left with Arnold Glimcher. It may not be worth that much according to Rufus Fosher, an art critic and friend of Louise, who wrote a memorial tribute to Louise in the *Camden Herald* on July 21, 1994.



**Louise Nevelson with Andrew Wyeth at the show, in 1979, that brought her "home" to Rockland.**