



Esther Lipman

Esther Cohen Lipman came from a family of seven daughters and three sons. The eldest daughter, Ida, worked for a man in Boston who staked peddlers. In his store she met a man, Chaim Handwerker, who married her and took her to Augusta. The second daughter married a peddler from Gardiner, Jake Goldberg, who settled in Skowhegan in 1901. When she developed tuberculosis, Esther and her husband, Sam Lipman, left Boston with their six children to take care of her and her family in Skowhegan. When Mrs. Goldberg died, her five children

(including the retarded youngest one) came to live with Esther, although other members of the Cohen family took them for short periods of time.

Esther's oldest son, Bernard, was eight years old when the Lipmans moved to Skowhegan. He had two older sisters and three younger brothers—Sidney, Harold, and Frank. Later, another sister, Beverly, was born. Elizabeth, the second oldest, married unfortunately and had to bring her two children back to Esther, who raised her own seven children, her sister's five, and her granddaughters, Charlotte and Cynthia.

Sam, a custom presser, worked for a tailor when the family came to Skowhegan, but soon started a scrap-collecting business. It was a common occupation for people with no capital, and it required no particular skill. In 1921 he was so discouraged by the freezing cold house, with no running water and no windows, that he left for Boston, where he could work at his craft. The family refused to go back to the city after a taste of rural life. He sent money, and the family visited him, but after three years he came back. Sam would travel with a wagon and team of horses to Portland for fresh fish that he would peddle on his way back to Skowhegan. He finally bought a truck in 1925. Business was good, and the family was growing up when Sam was killed in an accident in front of the Hinckley School in December 1931.

Esther had no money for a funeral. The children stood around, frightened and hungry. Sam was lying on a bed of straw on the floor of the cold house when Bernard, age twenty-one, went to the local banker to ask for a loan. The president of the bank gave him what he asked for, \$300. The funeral director prepared the body for burial in the modest pine box free and sent it to Boston where Bernard and an uncle gave Sam a Jewish burial. Sam must have been a kind, loving person for he is remembered with deep affection in Skowhegan.

The family did not observe the Sabbath, and the boys were not bar mitzvahed, but they were keenly aware of their Judaism. Although there was no social intercourse with non-Jews, many came to the house after the accident to offer help.

Esther's home was a refuge for travelers, relatives, and stray cats and dogs. They came for a meal or several months—somehow, there was simple food for everyone who came. Her parents came to live nearby, and there was much visiting back and forth. In Europe her mother, a well-educated girl of twenty-three, had

been considered an old maid. She married a yeshiva (Hebrew School) student beneath her in ability and learning because of her age and lack of dowry. In America he rarely worked; she somehow earned enough to support them and the younger of their ten children by maintaining a boarding house. He instilled Judaism by venting his anger against Gentiles.

There were always people around to buy or sell scrap. Despite the heavy traffic, the girls remember a clean home. The house was added to from time to time to house visitors. Chickens were raised. Vegetables were grown. The boys would drive out with a load of scrap by 2 A.M., heading for Boston, and the girls would be roused a few hours later to air the bedclothes, wash the dishes, sweep up, and get ready for school. The elementary school was a three-story brick, walk-up, no-nonsense school run by spinsters and widows. After school there was no contact with classmates; work was obligatory. Sorting of scrap and mountains of laundry took hours. Water had to be heated on the wood stove, loads of wood had to be carried in, and in winter many lines had to be strung up in the house to dry the clothes.

The home was kosher, indeed Bernard ("Barney") remembers how his father (whom he accompanied on his scrap-collecting trips) refused to eat anything but bread and boiled eggs in the homes of farmers. He would urge Barney to eat, but he'd wait until he came home.

The entertainment was provided by Esther, her father, the visitors, and the few Jewish families in Skowhegan and Waterville. They told stories and legends they remembered from Europe—tragic, comic, and moralistic. Esther, who had come to America at age fifteen, often told about the beggars who would gather in the woods—just as the unemployed did in the United States during the Depression:

"A woman in our town who used to give the beggars bread was mixing a large batch of dough when a neighbor suggested she put poison in the bread to discourage the beggars from coming to her house. But the woman could not do it. Shortly thereafter, her son was lost in the woods. Not only did the beggars show him the way home, but they shared his mother's bread with him.

"A woman had a son who was hiding from the czar's army. She met a woman who asked to borrow a kosher pot for someone. In those days, the czar offered three rubles for information about anyone avoiding the army. The first woman went to the police to

report the woman who wanted to borrow the pot. The police found the boy and paid her three rubles for her own son.

"During a pogrom in Poland, my young uncle developed a very serious cough. The family decided to send him to America where the climate and good food might benefit him. My grandmother was ready to sit shiva (mourn him as dead) when she decided to send his kid brother with him. It was just as efficacious to grieve over two sons as over one.

"Herschel came to visit a former neighbor in Odessa. Pest that he was, people avoided him. The neighbor greeted him, 'Hello, how are you? I have to go away now.' Herschel wanted to know what she was cooking in the large pot. 'Clothes? All right, you can go. I'll wait here.' When she returned, he informed her he had added his clothes to the pot. Expecting him to leave before she returned, she did not tell him she was cooking noodles in the pot."

Barney remembered some of the stories. "In czarist Russia all legally manufactured liquor was heavily taxed. Two villagers agreed to drive to the next village to buy a keg of bootleg vodka. On the way back it was very cold, so cold that one of them (acknowledging he did not forget their agreement not to drink the vodka but to sell it for a profit) said, 'I have twenty-five kopeks. My money is as good as anyone else's, so sell me a drink.' Soon the other man bought a drink and returned the twenty-five kopeks. The wind drove the temperature down with each verst (mile). The twenty-five kopeks changed hands so often there was very little vodka left by the time they came back. Both are still wondering how so much liquor could have been sold for so little money."

In Waterville the Jews invited the Jewish Colby students to their homes for the holidays. On one such occasion a student wandered into the kitchen and found his host playing solitaire. The man was wearing a derby, no tie, in shirt sleeves that flapped around his forearms, highlighted by a round red nose any clown would envy—a born loser. As he observed, the red jack was placed on the black queen, which prompted the student to say, "That's not right." With a defiant slap the cards were gathered up and piled on the table. "When I play cards, I win! To hell with the cards." At least here he was not a loser.

Barney worked in a shoddy mill reworking old wool all through high school. The younger boys worked with scrap. Despite the dire poverty, Charlotte, one of the granddaughters, does not remember feeling poor. Their French Canadian

neighbors did not have much either. When Sam died, Barney took the insurance money and bought a truck to collect leather, wool, iron, and other scrap. The four sons not only supported the family, but all finished high school, and Barney almost graduated from Colby College. Sam had left a legacy of good will everywhere he traded, so the mill owners told the boys not to worry about paying for the scrap until they had earned enough money. Barney entered Colby College and became president of Gamma Phi Epsilon, and later Tau Delta Phi, an honorary fraternity. One of the brothers, Sidney, went into business for himself.

When Barney went into the U.S. Army in 1941, his brothers Harold and Frank carried on with the work at home. By the time Barney came back from Europe, the Lipmans were processing chickens on an assembly line. The family moved to Bangor when Charlotte graduated from high school in 1944. Esther was fifty-eight years old and was no longer active in business. Charlotte remembers the years after the war as the "fun" years. She became president of the Bangor Young Adult Group that included 150 people. They enjoyed dances, balls, trips, and fundraising affairs for the refugees. The communities outside Bangor supplied spouses. There were many mixed marriages. In fact, the non-Jewish member was often the more active Jewish member of the two. Charlotte worked in the office for several years when Harold and Frank ran the business. Harold was a stern taskmaster—never praised—always strict.

Charlotte married an engineer, Julius J. Goos, a distant relative of the Hoos family of Old Town. She and her husband were active parents of the Philip Lown Camp when their children were campers there. One of their sons was admitted to Phi Beta Kappa in his junior year at Tufts University. After her three children went to school, Charlotte began to buy and sell antique jewelry. She displays her collections at exclusive shows.

After World War II ended in Europe, Barney joined his brothers, Frank and Harold, in the poultry processing business in Bangor as financial expert. Frank was the salesman, and Harold took care of transportation. In 1950 the plant was moved to Augusta, where it became one of the five largest poultry processing operations in Maine. Not only did the Lipmans sell chickens to Macy's in New York, they also processed and canned fish to sell in Europe. Some fish oil was used as a supplement feed for the chickens. Two scientists monitored the feeding and care

of the millions of chickens raised on nineteen farms. The hatchery delivered 100,000 chicks each day. Esther lived with her youngest child, Beverly, and was no longer consulted about business, but the brothers and their families still regarded her as the head of the family. Indeed, as long as she lived, the brothers got along very well and included their children and other relatives in the business.

Esther used to talk about the ship on which she came to America. The British were awful, but the Dutch who understood Yiddish were pleasant to the children. One of her first jobs after she arrived was to roll tobacco into cigars with Samuel Gompers, the organizer of unions and first president of the American Federation of Labor. She would laugh about the chamber pot her mother bought (not knowing its use in America) to store prunes in her boarding house in Boston.

When Bertha, the eldest child, came to Skowhegan at age eleven, she was thrilled to see the waterfalls, the factories powered by the falls, and the trees taller than any she had seen in Boston. The wool-spinning, shoe, wood, and paper mills were all there. The family soon met the Goldbergs in the junk trade; the Russakoffs had a jewelry store; the Graffmans had an automotive shop, and later the Sterns opened a clothing store. Jews who owned tanneries in Hartland (where Frank later worked) and Jewish peddlers boarded with Jewish families. It was the custom for a shopper for kosher meat to stay with a Jewish family in Waterville while she bought for her own family and other families. Esther shopped like that too, especially for the holidays.

Bertha married young and lives in Arizona, but she remembers how hard everybody worked. Labor was cheap—there were no unions. But she feels men like John Dole (the Hawaiian pineapple king) and John Deere (the tractor manufacturer), her contemporaries, are examples of hard-working Yankees. "Not everyone admires Yankees. Most people in Maine define a Yankee as the Protestant descendant of early immigrants. The Yankee scorns everyone who is not a Yankee and tends to drive a hard bargain. He has no use for people who need help—he made it on his own. He was smart enough to select a grandfather who came to Maine when land was cheap, and he added his hard labor to the land to become a grudging taxpayer. The more recent immigrants felt the Yankee coldness, but some like Barney counted many of them among his friends."

Barney met Thelma, the daughter of a customer in Salem, Massachusetts, when he came home from the war. They were married in 1946. Sam, their first child, travels to China and Ukraine where he has helped establish chicken processing plants. Two of their children live in Maine; one moved to Massachusetts.

The Lipmans have contributed a great deal to the state in the form of volunteer work, chickens, and money. Practically every fundraiser received money for picnics, dinners, church suppers, etc. Barney is a past president of the Pinetree Society for Crippled Children, a former trustee of the Maine Medical Center, former director of the Augusta General Hospital, the Dirigo Bank, the Red Cross, a former president of the Family Association, a board member of Camp Lown, and an active member of the only synagogue in Augusta (that serves Gardiner, Winthrop, and Manchester too). Thelma served on the Milk Commission by appointment of Governor James Longley from 1976 to 1981.

In June of 1976 Colby College dedicated the Alfred King Chapman Room in the Library to honor the professor who taught English from 1928 to 1969 and served as head of the department from 1953 to 1966. The room was remodeled and refurbished by Barney Lipman to honor his literature professor, and to serve as an archive for Colbiana Collections. "The Shaker style arm chairs and tables complement the very functional floor to ceiling book and display cases. The high ceiling and large windows allow the sun to fill this living memorial with a sense of joy in life."

President Robert Strider compensated for the years Barney put up with an anti-Semitic basketball coach when he awarded Barney an honorary degree in 1976. Colby was not the only college in Maine to suffer fools. When the Colby team played at Bowdoin, Barney met graffiti like, "Kill the Colby kikes." At the June 1976 graduation, however, Rev. Walter E. Fauntroy, congressman from Washington, D.C. who had been a lecturer at Colby, was awarded a Doctor of Laws degree. A Doctor of Fine Arts degree was also bestowed on Jacob Lawrence, a distinguished black artist who is a member of the board of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture as well as a professor at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Barney and Thelma established a forum at Colby for discussions about Judaism that attracts many students and faculty. The yearly event features a prominent authority on some

phase of the Jewish experience and allows private as well as public questioning.

Did everyone who came to Skowhegan succeed? Harold remembers how hard they all worked. Frank enjoyed everything he did. He flew to Europe several times a year while managing the fish business in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and Nova Scotia. Barney remembers his hard work in a shoddy mill where he almost lost his hand.

Esther did not talk about hard times, but she resented a waste of time and money. She died when she reached ninety-four years of age, with most of her family around her.