Lil and Suss in the home of Governor Burton Cross when Suss was awarded the Humanitarian Medal by the Daughters of the American Revolution, September 12, 1978.

The Yankee Fiddler

(excerpted from my book Yankee Fiddler, *1984)*

A soothing breeze greeted Julius G. Sussman when he arrived in Augusta, Maine, that last day in July, 1934, to start over again at age thirty-nine. He had graduated from Colby College in 1919 and taught in the Waterville High School for three years, but to Augusta businessman he was a newcomer from Boston.

Long before the stock market crash of 1929, there were people like Sussman who found it hard to earn a living. He had

been a substitute teacher in Boston and Columbia, Connecticut; he sold magazines in three towns; ran a lunch counter in a shoe factory; invested ten thousand dollars (borrowed) for a partnership in a shoe factory; clerked for General Electric; and even had his own violin school with 104 pupils, yet he could not support himself and his wife, Lil. They moved many times during their first fourteen years of married life. The first year in Maine was like the previous fourteen—Lil worked in a newly opened shoe factory in Hallowell as bookkeeper and buyer until she felt sure they would be successful in business this time.

Suss, as he was called by friends and employees, bought the Augusta News Agency on the advice of his prosperous brother-in-law, a news distributor in Massachusetts. After he paid the debts of the previous owner and bought the franchise, Suss found he had only two two-cent papers to sell, *The Boston Globe* and the *Boston Post.* In a few months he obtained the right to distribute the *Boston Herald,* the *Advertiser,* and a few magazines.

Lil said, "We came up here under very heavy debt, but we had to maintain a certain dignity in order to make an impression. You paid $1.25 for a hundred newspapers, you delivered them to the stores, and charged $1.60—you made 35¢ for a hundred. I wasn't used to dealing in pennies; I was working for a shoe company dealing in millions. You also had to take unsold copies back, sort them, cut the headings, and return the headings to Boston for 35 cents a hundred. It took a long time to earn a living. Debts were piling up, but we still enjoyed our concerts and entertained visiting musicians.'

Suss recalled those early days, "Once we figured out we worked ninety hours a week for five cents an hour." The war years, 1940 to 1945, unexpectedly proved to be good for the news agency. Since there was a shortage of paper, only enough papers were printed to meet the demand. No more headings had to be cut from unsold papers. Suss picked up dealerships from the north and west of August because Lil consolidated the billing and paid the bills previous owners had not paid for years. When World War II ended, he hired a manager and later put him in business in Bangor. He let him pay for the business over a ten-year span. Now the widow and children of the buyer run a chain of stores throughout Maine called Mr. Paperback.

The only trouble Suss ever had with the law came with the warm weather in June 1937. Charles A. Bodwell of the Watch and

Ward Society came from Boston to complain that Suss and four of his dealers were selling literature to corrupt the morals of youth. There had been no local complaints, but the police confiscated 300 copies of such "vulgar" publications as "Spicy Stories" and a book on marital sex ordered by a local doctor who gave them to newly married couples. Suss posted $500 bond and was remanded to Kennebec Valley Superior Court. On advice from his lawyer, a retired judge, Suss and Lil took a trip out of town on the day of the trial, and the case was filed. He never heard of it again.

Suss, almost eighty-nine years old, was a gracious, witty, optimistic person despite four heart attacks and personal tragedies. He was still 5' 9" tall, slim, and energetic. His tiny wife, Lil (she claimed to be a year younger), never more than 4' 10" tall, was scarcely 4' high because her back was bent. They were very devoted to each other and loved to talk about their five-year courtship.

His parents, Mary Zase from Suvalk, Poland, and his father, Samuel Abramsky, from Yanova, Poland, were married in Cincinnati by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise in 1894. Suss was born in Covington, Kentucky, a year later. He had no idea why his parents were married by a reform rabbi since his mother's parents were Orthodox Jews or why he was born in Kentucky when the good hospital was in Cincinnati, but the family moved shortly after his birth to Lynn, Massachusetts, to be near their relatives.

From his itinerant actor father he thought he inherited his love for performing, but to whom he was indebted for his talent as a musician he knew not. He learned to play the violin by a member of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He started to take lessons when he was eight years old and stopped when he could no longer pay for them when he was sixteen, but he never stopped playing the violin. He taught himself to play the viola and mandolin.

When he was seventeen years old, the family moved to Dover, New Hampshire, where his uncle had a cleaning and dyeing business. Here the family name changed to Sussman, the same name the uncle used. When Suss was fourteen he was given a choice—he could go to high school or go to work to pay for violin lessons. He chose to work, but in New Hampshire he entered high school, three years late, so that he could play in the school orchestra. He was admitted to Colby College by entrance examinations before he graduated from high school. Fifty years

later, the school superintendent of Dover awarded him his diploma at a Kiwanis luncheon that was arranged by one of his dealers.

At Colby he used his only worldly possession, the violin, to earn tuition and his board and room. He worked two summers at the Balsams, an enormous summer resort in Dixville Notch, New Hampshire, where "No Jews Allowed" signs were prominently displayed. During his third year he dropped out of school for lack of funds, but he still recalled with pleasure that the president of Colby came to the Balsams to see him. Later that year Suss and five classmates joined the United States Navy. They trained on the campus with the army unit. He played with the college and professional bands until the end of World War I. Suss did not mind being one of three non-fraternity seniors until his roommate proposed him for membership in his Greek fraternity only to be blackballed by an anti-Semite. When he was told about it by his outraged friend, he organized the first Jewish fraternity on the campus with twelve undergraduates. This is typical of the way he handled many problems later on.

When Suss came to Augusta, the few observant Jews walked to Gardiner, six miles away, to attend services. Although his Hebrew education consisted of two years in a Talmud Torah school and a bar mitzvah, he was a founder of the only synagogue in Augusta, Beth El, and served as president for fourteen years. He was a godfather to Jews, both resident and transient, according to former state Senator Bennett Katz. No one in need left empty-handed, said a former employee. On their fiftieth wedding anniversary, the Jewish community honored the Sussmans at a banquet and presented them with their first television set in 1971.

The Sussmans did not saw lumber, raise sheep, grow potatoes, cure tobacco, or grind corn like the pioneers before them, but they are decidedly part of the folklore of Maine. Throughout the state, people knew him as the violinist or violist in the August Symphony Orchestra, the Cecelia Music Club, Blaine House (the governor's mansion), St. Mary's Catholic Church, Green St. United Methodist Church, South Parish Congregational Church, the Greek Orthodox and Spiritualist churches, Colby College, the University of Maine, the Veterans Facility at Togus, the State Hospital for the Mentally Ill, Pineland Center for Retarded Citizens, as well as private schools and convalescent homes. He accepted no fees; all honorariums were

directed to the Pineland Center, where his son, a Down's Syndrome patient, lived and died.

When he was fifty years old, he decided he would like to be a clown like the ones he accompanied. He entertained children in the kindergartens and old people in institutions all around Augusta by dressing as a clown in front of them and playing a violin made from a two gallon tin can. The Japanese kimono was held together with outsized clothespins, but the red nose glowed brightly as the audience clapped to the music.

He traveled throughout and outside the state when he was president of Kiwanis and the Kennebec Valley Council for Retarded Children. He was the only male president of the Maine Federation of Music Clubs. In fact he was the only male at the national convention of fifty music federations in New Orleans. He recalled that his speech received the most applause.

Until they came to Augusta, the Sussmans did not feel they could afford a child. But after fifteen years of marriage, Lil decided it was time, debts or no debts. They had borrowed on every insurance policy, and the agency was still not very profitable, but she was tired of working in the shoe business. She was forty-three when Sidney John was born. Something was wrong, but he was not diagnosed a Down's Syndrome patient until he was a year old. She took him to doctors in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. She brought him to the Fernald School near Boston, but she finally accepted the fact that he was not growing as well as she and Suss expected him to grow. The Pearl Harbor attack hastened the decision to send Sidney John to a resident school. After much research, the Bancroft School near Rutgers University became his school for sixteen years. Suss and Lil visited him on alternate months during the year and every week when the school operated a summer school at Owl's Head, Maine. These visits were very traumatic. If he cried, Lil felt she was not taking care of him like a mother should. If he did not cry, she felt she had been replaced and she would reproach herself. World War II depleted the staff, there was no insurance against sudden death of parents who could not provide for perpetual care for the students, and the cost of care was rising every few months. Lil could not sleep; her doctor was concerned for her health and finally persuaded Suss that Sidney John should be moved to Pineland Center. Suss and Lil visited the young man, age twenty-two by this time with the mental ability of an eight

year old, every week. They would take him and another patient on trips to restaurants and concerts. He would come home for vacations. He was very popular with the staff because he was good natured and generous with his gifts. When he died at forty-three years of age, a special part of the Pineland Center cemetery was designated for Jews.

Meanwhile, Suss and a number of parents of impaired children formed the Kennebec Valley Council for Retarded Children. Later it expanded to become the Kennebec Valley Council for Retarded Citizens, and Suss became president for two terms. He was instrumental in obtaining a building from the Hallowell town manager for a school that was named after him, and a state scholarship for teachers was developed in his name. He not only raised money for the education of the children, but taught the parents how to cope with them.

Winters in New England are famous for high snowdrifts, but Suss remembered slippery roads when he sold *Delineator* magazines in Lowell, Lawrence, and Haverhill, Massachusetts, as well as Nashua, New Hampshire. "One winter I slid off the road four times. I slipped off one road, hit a tree, and bounced right back on the road." Perhaps that is why he was not afraid to take a chance on the Augusta News Agency in Maine. In 1936 the spring thaw caused dams to break, bridges to wash out, and roads to float between towns. Suss drove a truck to his dealers with the Sunday papers through it all.

In between music engagements, the business, illness, attention to his son, wife, and sister-in-law Pat, who lived with the Sussmans since her breakdown thirty years before, Suss was always available to help any of his "boys" who were in trouble. According to former employees, the police would call Suss day or night when one of his former or present employees needed bail or other help. He started bank accounts for the boys that gave them a good start as parents or college students. Lil trained many girls in office procedures and wrote recommendations for them when they applied for positions with the state government. Many of their former employees would visit and even write when Suss made the news on television or in print. Suss wrote the letter that accompanied the application to a fundamentalist college for the daughter of a former employee. She proudly tells people that her daughter is the only one admitted to this Christian college recommended by a Jew. They express their admiration for the

Sussmans by contributing to the United Jewish Appeal, just because he had been the solicitor for this organization for many years.

Suss never forgot the people he met at Colby College, and apparently they remembered him too, for he was president of the Alumni Association and was awarded the highest honor, a Colby brick, for service to the college. He was also honored with two gavels because he served as state president of Kiwanis and of the Maine Federation of Music Clubs.

As a humanitarian, Suss was honored by the American Legion, B'nai B'rith, Daughters of the American Revolution, the American Red Cross, Kiwanis, the French Canadian le Club Calumet, the United States Veterans Facility at Togus, the United Jewish Appeal, and the Anti-Defamation League, as well as the state legislature where he opened some sessions as chaplain.

The impact of the Sussmans on their community is best illustrated by the letters Suss and Beth El received from churches after the Union Liberals Israelite Synagogue on Rue Copernic in Paris, France, was bombed. Suss's long association with pastors and congregants as a musician must have helped to dispel the Yankee intolerance that was the defense of the Puritans, and Augusta is a pleasant place for most people because Suss lived there for almost fifty years.