



Sophia Dion Slosberg

When I met Mrs. Slosberg, she was in her nineties, still keeping tenants in her large home in Gardiner. Her daughters-in-law, Irene and Lynn, came to help this tiny, sharp-eyed, friendly woman talk about herself and old times.

Her father sent for Sophia and her older sister, Ann, when Sophia was fifteen years old. The girls were met in Boston by an uncle who kept them with his family overnight and then put them on a boat to Gardiner. From one boat to another boat—from Lithuania to America. Sophia made the voyage in good health, but her sister was terribly ill; Sophia had to carry her off the boat.

Almost the next day the girls were sent to work in various homes and factories. Sophia said she knew no Russian or English. In Riga the family spoke Latvian and Yiddish. She never went to school, but she was able to pick up Lithuanian, Russian, and English, Sophia said, from the people she worked with. Although she was glad to get away from Latvia, she cried for three weeks thinking of her mother left alone to care for the smaller children.

Sophia worked in Lewiston for three dollars a week because rent cost five dollars per month, milk was sixteen cents a gallon, wood was taken from the woods, and though there was no water or light, she did not have to care for cows or chickens. She had never before seen a banana or lettuce. She was shocked to see a

dark-skinned person. "I thought I'd died. I got used to these things," she said. Her father made a "nice living" of nine dollars a week sorting metal and rags collected by his relatives. When he saved up twenty-two dollars for a ticket, he sent for her mother and five siblings. She felt sorry for them, remembering the stinking ship, one week on potatoes, and three days of London fog, but she wanted her mother to join the family. One of her brothers went to California as a teenager to avoid snow. When he came later for a visit, he complained of the overabundance of rain; she advised him to take home some snow. Humor lightened each load.

When the Slosbergs came to America from Vierst in the 1880s, they thought they would be more welcome if they bore German names. Krimmer became Slosberg, Dion became Goldberg, and Goldstein became Atkins. There was a time, Sophia recalled, when boys pulled the beards of old men and threw snowballs, but she knew of no serious anti-Semitism. Max Slosberg, Sophia's uncle, was a cobbler in Europe, but here he lived on a farm near Randolph, where he collected maple syrup and sold it as a cash crop. He had cows and chickens too, but with seven daughters and five sons there was no surplus to sell. Max brought Saul Dion, Sophia's father, a Hebrew teacher, from Riga to prepare the boys for bar mitzvah. Two years later Saul brought two of his daughters, Ann and Sophia. Ann was betrothed to Max's son, Joseph, and had an unhappy marriage. "That's water over the dam."

Sophia had a happy marriage. She was asked to accompany her cousin Louis, Joseph's younger brother, on a boat loaded with white rags for Boston. "I knew him before we started, but we fell in love by the time we came back." When Sophia was nineteen years old they married. By that time her mother was in Gardiner—she made a beautiful wedding for them and they moved in with Louis' family. Her mother-in-law was a dressmaker, pantsmaker, and milliner. There were about sixty families living around Gardiner who came to celebrate and pray together. Louis's immediate family consisted of his father and mother, who came with five children and bore six more in America. The Naiman family had ten children (one became a judge); the Goldbergs had several boys. Many Slosbergs married Dions and Goldbergs. Sophia proudly spoke of a cousin, Sam Slosberg, the manufacturer of Stride Rite shoes, who gave a large donation to

the music department at Brandeis University. Her son Sam and his cousin Howard Slosberg are lawyers. Each family had its own farm, but they were so closely related they felt at home in every home. In fact, if a husband and wife quarreled, one would move in temporarily with a relative who lived nearby. The social life in the family was so satisfying that there was no need or desire to make friends of the non-Jews in the community.

Relatives brought relatives from Europe and boarded them until they could be settled in Gardiner, Portland, Randolph, Auburn, or other nearby towns. Since there were no telephones, relatives could not be invited to visit or be notified of a visit. When a family felt like a visit, usually in fall or winter, the wagon was piled high with children sitting on hay or quilts. Gifts of food, tools, and handmade clothing were standard. Sophia spoke of trips to visit relatives as social affairs, but she said sometimes the trading of milk, butter, and eggs in Lewiston was included. Sick people were cared for in each other's homes. Children were born in the upstairs room of cousins who cared for the mother and child. Doctors charged fifteen dollars per baby and fifty cents for a home visit for other needs. Someone was always available to help. No one expected payment. After all they were sure to need help sometime too. One can of salmon fed everyone.

They lived in a self-imposed ghetto. They had three ritual slaughterers (shochet); a Mr. Epstein ordered kosher meat from Bangor and Lewiston; a Goldstein printed marriage certificates (ketuba). Contact with non-Jews was minimal—on the job if at all. Yet one of Louis's brothers married a non-Jew and was "lost to the family." Sophia was friendly with her French-Canadian neighbors, the Pomerleaus, but they never ate in each other's homes. The first time non-Jews came into the kitchen, they saw candles lit on Friday evening and asked who died. Sophia explained the kitchen became a synagogue on Friday—other days the bima (alter) was covered with an embroidered cloth when the kitchen became a parlor. "We don't only pray in the synagogue," Sophia would explain.

Soon there were two synagogues in lofts of stores in Randolph and a real synagogue was built in Gardiner. People walked to services from Augusta (six miles) and other towns in all kinds of weather. With all the boys in the Naiman, Slosberg, and Goldberg families, there was never a problem to have a minyan (the ten men required for a service). A Hebrew teacher came from Portland. Sophia's father, well versed in Hebrew, conducted

services most of the time, but on special occasions, Rabbi Berent came from Lewiston, and Rabbi Sky came from Portland. Until forty years ago, most Jews in Gardiner were merchants who supported the Orthodox synagogue. After World War II the third generation went to college, took jobs in Augusta in state government and scattered all over the world—no more minyan was possible, Sophia said. In 1960 the synagogue closed, and the Board donated the torah, treasury, and other valuables to Temple Beth-El, which had opened in Augusta in 1955.

Peddling was a common pursuit for men who had very little money and no skills. Sophia's husband not only cut ice when he was a young man, he peddled fleece-lined union suits in addition to the usual basket of needles, thread, and yard goods. Ice cutting on the Kennebec River was a big business then. A man could earn \$1.50–\$2.25 per day if he used his horse and wagon. Although the work was hard, the men could return to their homes at the end of the twelve-hour day. Sophia did not know how far he pushed his sled when Louis left home every Sunday morning. He carried hard-boiled eggs and stale bread she had baked so that he would not have to eat non-kosher food the farmers offered. To avoid insulting the kind people who put him up for the night, he always said he had "a bad stomach." By the time he was thirty-three years old, he had \$1,000 saved so that he could open a store. Three generations of customers always inquired, "How's your stomach?" Now Sophia laughed, "Foolish, I can see it now." He would come home Thursday night and cut ice the next day. He never did anything on Saturday—never even read the paper. He lived to be eighty-seven years old.

Their son, Sam, was six months old when they opened the store on October 8, 1910. They paid sixteen dollars per month for rent, and "everybody talked about the beautiful merchandise." "I took a broom and papered the whole house." The store opened early to provide breakfast and packed lunches for the ice-cutters. This meant baby care and store tending from 5:30 in the morning until 11:00 at night during the winter. Despite this long day there were plenty of visitors in the evening. The lamp was placed on the sink, and tea and cakes would be served to the numerous relatives and schnorrers (beggars) who stopped in.

Sophia felt expenses were low, "no water tax—we pumped our own water, eggs were sixteen cents a pound, and the big black stove was fed wood gathered from the forest." Sophia thought she was the happiest girl in America.

In 1936 the flood that brought the Kennebec River into the basements and streets of Gardiner ruined a lot of merchandise. Louis sold almost everything at half price. People traveled in boats, but Sophia always told her family and friends, "Better days are coming." The store was successful. Her first son, Charles, married Irene Davidson from Portland, and both worked in the store. After Louis died, Sophia turned the store over to Charles in 1958. *The Kennebec Journal* printed a long story with pictures on the change in ownership. Charles continued to develop the business, but Irene substituted in both the elementary and high school in addition to teaching in the Sunday School in Augusta. She volunteered in Togus Veterans Hospital, served as a Girl Scout leader during summer and winter camps, and helped the poor and retarded.

When I met Irene, she was a widow and missed her four children. They had graduated from Simmons, John Hopkins, MIT, and Einstein Medical School in New York. She was happy they had settled where they had Jewish friends. When Irene was growing up in Portland, there were sisters and brothers, their spouses, and children, but "here now it is lonely." She is living near her daughter in Boston, where she can be active in the community.

Sophia's son Sam, eight years younger than Charles, graduated from Bowdoin College and Harvard Law School. He married Lynn Weitz of Weehawken, New Jersey after she graduated from Sargent College, Boston University, as a physical education teacher. In 1935 (during the Depression) Sam started a law practice in Gardiner while Lynn sold the antiques she had brought from college. Three years later he ran for office in the state legislature as a Republican, the only party in existence. A politician told him he'd rather vote for a Jew than a Democrat. In the legislature Sam served on the judiciary, labor, and banking committees. Later, as assistant attorney general he drafted bills. Governor Sewall appointed him to the Legislative Research Commission where he prepared legislation and acted as the first director from 1947 to 1974. After he retired, he worked part-time for the Maine State Bar Association. He also served Beth Israel as president for many years.

Meanwhile Lynn substituted in high school, taught life-saving classes for Junior Red Cross, worked in the Girl Scout camp, and ran a private camp in New Hampshire. She also served as president of the auxiliary of Gardiner General Hospital.

Lynn and Sam have two sons. David is an architect and computer consultant in Paris. Kenneth, a professor of photography at Santa Cruz University, taped an interview with Sophia when she was ninety-two years old. In 1980 Sophia died, one year short of 100.



Sophia Slosberg proudly shows off sons, Sam and Charles