



GROWING UP JEWISH IN AMERICA

AN ORAL HISTORY

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and HARVEY FROMMER**

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Then I moved to New York, and I realized the Allegheny Mountains separate the East from the rest of the country. New York Jews are used to seeing a piece of lox sliced in front of them. Midwestern Jews get pre-sliced, prepackaged lox. That's the essence of midwestern Jewry: It's pre-packaged.

Morris Kerness: Duluth, Minnesota, and Superior, Wisconsin, face each other across Lake Superior. In my day, Duluth was the conservative, proper town. Superior was the wide-open town with all the whorehouses. We went there many times.

Dan Kossoff: Duluth was a beautiful city with hills, like San Francisco. Superior was the tough port town of wall-to-wall bars and honky-tonks. But Jews in both cities were one community, very insular and closely knit.

Is Crystal: In the early years of this century, iron ore was discovered north of Duluth. The little range towns like Hibbing, Virginia, and Chisolm, five to ten miles apart from each other, beckoned for workers. Jewish people arrived and opened general stores. Some of the towns came to have fairly nice-sized Jewish populations.

In 1913 my father left Galveston, Texas, where he had been sent by HIAS and joined his brother in Duluth. He worked seven days a week, ten or more hours a day, and at the same time went to night school to learn English. In 1917 he bought a little deli downtown. By 1920, when he had become fairly well settled financially, my father returned to Russia and brought my mother, sister, and me to America.

During the crossing, my father told us all about Duluth: what the store was like, how all the children in Duluth went to school. I couldn't wait. At last, I thought, we were going to America: the *goldeneh medina*, the land of gold that my mother, uncle, and grandparents had talked about all the time. Though my mother and sister were pretty seasick most of the way, I was so excited that my folks had a tough time holding me down. I kept climbing up on the railing, and they were afraid I'd fall into the ocean.

We stopped off at Ellis Island after disembarking, but since my dad was

already an American citizen, we didn't have to go through Immigration. My very first day in America, I had a Hershey's chocolate bar. That's how I started off. We spent a week with family in New York City and really saw the town before moving on. We arrived in Duluth on May 12, 1920. The snow still covered the ground. The next day, the *Duluth News Tribune* ran a story about our arrival, and I began school.

Morris Kerness: Issy and I are about the same age. We met the day he came to Duluth and have been friends ever since. The first thing I did with him was get some United Cigar coupons and shoot craps. Naturally, I took the money from him. He was a greenhorn.

Is Crystal: They used to sing a Yiddish song about a *greena kuzina*, a beautiful girl, full of life and joy, who comes from the old country to America and loses her bloom and vitality from working in the sweatshops. But that didn't describe our experience in Duluth. The cold was never a problem for us. We dressed for the season. The cars would go up the icy hills and slide down. We got used to it. We skated, skied, went sledding—all the winter things.

Morris Kerness: We'd start up on Tenth Street with our toboggans and slide all the way down the steep hill to First Street. The only thing that wasn't fun was walking up the hill with the sled again.

Winters in Duluth were very cold. It hit forty below many days. But it is a beautiful city, sitting on a hill at the head of Lake Superior. You can see the whole panorama of the lake, and deep forests, and Wisconsin on the other side.

Is Crystal: From the time we came and through the early forties, Duluth had a population of about thirty-five hundred to four thousand Jews. The rest were Scandinavian, Irish, Polish, and German. We did not feel the anti-Semitism in Duluth the way they felt it in Minneapolis, which was one of the strongest hotbeds of anti-Jewish feeling in the whole country. We read about that in the newspapers all the time.

Morris Kerness: Even though I had many non-Jewish friends, I felt different from the gentile population. I'm only five feet four, but I was a tough kid. Issy was gentler than me. He'd turn the other cheek; I didn't.

Issy's house was about eight blocks away from mine, in the nicer part of town where most of the merchants lived. We lived in the Jewish neighborhood up on Ninth Street, the regular ghetto. Two blocks north up the hill were the Polish people. We were always fighting. They'd call us "sheenie" and "kike." But I'll tell you what: we busted a few heads.

The Jewish ghetto was a radius of four to five blocks of modest one-family homes. The fathers were mostly peddlers. They'd park their wagons in front of the houses, and the horses would walk around by themselves to the barns in the back alleys. They knew the way. You didn't see many cars around Duluth until the mid-twenties. My father had a neat, meticulous harness shop on First Street. He was a very honest and hard-working man. Like the other men in the ghetto, he was Orthodox—poor but proper.

Franklin School was right near our ghetto, and 80 percent of the kids were Jewish, so on the High Holy Days they practically closed the school down. We had a teacher by the name of Mrs. Thor who was very mean. Every now and then, we'd come into the class, and she'd go: "I smell gefilte fish."

Once a kid named Frank Rachman was absent for a couple of days. Instead of sending truant officers, the teachers used to walk over to the houses during recess to find out why someone wasn't at school. So it happened that Friday morning, Mrs. Thor went to Mrs. Rachman's house.

Our mothers knew all about Mrs. Thor. That day Mrs. Rachman offered Mrs. Thor some gefilte fish. Mrs. Thor sat down at the table, and Mrs. Rachman gave her a plate with a couple of fish patties. Only they weren't boiled. Mrs. Rachman sat there and watched while Mrs. Thor bit into a raw patty. Mrs. Thor never smelled gefilte fish again.

Is Crystal: Almost every store on Superior Street was owned by a Jewish merchant: the bookstore, the clothing store, the linen store, the appliance store. They were open on Saturdays, but on Friday nights and the High Holy Days they were closed, and it was pretty dead downtown.

There were three Orthodox shuls in Duluth. Though they had Hebrew

names, we called them by the street each was on. There was also Temple Emanuel, the Reform temple, for the German Jews and those who had already made a few bucks.

When someone died, the body of the deceased would be placed on the floor and surrounded by lit candles. Then they laid it down on a plank and took it across the river to the Jewish cemetery in Superior, Wisconsin—just like they did in Europe. Later a law was passed that required the body be enclosed in a box before it was carried to a grave.

Summers in Duluth were beautiful, nice and cool with the lake. Back in the twenties and thirties, peddlers from New York and Chicago who sold umbrellas, fancy handkerchiefs and such would come up for the summers. Their headquarters became our store. They'd sit around and discuss world and Jewish affairs, read aloud from the *Forward* and other Jewish papers.

After a while, my dad's store became the meeting place for the steady stream of Jewish people who came from the East. It was a kind of checkpoint on the way west, a place to get kosher food, to speak the *mama-loshen*. A lot of them would keep money in my dad's safe. They all wore beards—which may be why I thought they were very old.

Our store catered mainly to foot traffic, but we also had the so-called carriage trade. In the early days, they drove up in horses and wagons. In later years, they drove up in chauffeur-driven limos. These were the money barons who made it on lumber, grain, or shipping. They lived in mansions. It amazed me to see them come into our little store to buy caviar or marinated artichoke hearts, fruit pickled in brandy and cognac. We developed a friendship with them. It's hard to say what their inner feelings were about dealing with Jews, but outwardly they were very friendly.

My father knew how to make wine out of raisins or grapes—beautiful stuff. At Christmas he'd make a special batch, bottle it, and give it out to the non-Jewish customers. We had a wonderful relationship with them.

In Europe, my sister and I knew nothing about Christmas. Here we learned about it in school. Once a Jewish friend from a wealthier family sold us a bill of goods, telling us if we hung up stockings, they'd get filled with toys and other presents. We tried it, but all we got was coal and orange peels and potatoes. That was our parents' way of telling us Christmas wasn't our holiday.

Going out with a *shiksa* was frowned upon. You had to do it behind your parents' backs. When you took one out, you did it to have a good time. When you wanted to develop a relationship, you took out a Jewish girl. My mother used to come down to the skating rink—skating was a big thing in Duluth—to see that I was not skating with a *shiksa*.

There was a lot of camaraderie among the Jewish boys and girls in Duluth. We rarely ate *trayf*; we kept as kosher as we could. That's how my dad's store became such a hub: kids could get a kosher meat sandwich there.

A bunch of ten or twelve boys and girls would often drive up in a truck to the range towns fifty miles or more outside Duluth. In a town like Hibbing, there might be thirty or forty Jewish kids. Their parents were anxious for them to meet Jewish kids and were glad when we came up. They were very, very prosperous. Companies made billions of dollars up there. The schools were beautiful, and the kids got their school supplies for free.

In Duluth, a lot of the Jewish boys sold newspapers on the street, but my father didn't want me to do that. He also didn't want me hanging around the pool hall with the Damon Runyon kind of group.

Dan Kossoff: Is Crystal and my dad were boyhood friends. They took dancing classes together. By my time, much of our social activity revolved around Duluth's Jewish Community Center, where we played basketball.

Is Crystal: There was a strong Zionist group that took in Duluth and Superior and all the range towns. Every summer they held a picnic in the park, and that was a good place for the boys and girls to meet. They always had a speaker from some place, traveling cantors, actors from the Yiddish theater, people from the Workmen's Circle, socialists, union organizers. They were kind of an intellectual group, people of renown from New York. Some Sunday nights, my dad would close up the store to go hear them.

Dan Kossoff: Generally, anti-Semitism wasn't open, but under the surface, everyone understood it was there. The Northland Country Club was the greatest symbol: it was off-limits to Jews through the 1960s. During the winter, we used to sneak up on the slopes there and ride down on toboggans.

Always in the back of my mind was the idea: here we are, Jews playing in a place that is off-limits to us.

Dinah Crystal Kossoff: In grade school one of my best friends was Kathleen Dinham, the daughter of an orthodontist. Her parents would take me along to Northland Country Club and Pike Lake, a private swimming club. Even though I was very young, I knew Jews couldn't be members at those places, and going there gave me an uncomfortable feeling.

The Jewish families would make the hour-and-a-half drive to Patterson State Park. My father often left the store late in the afternoon to have dinner with us in the park. We were always wishing the temperature would reach seventy degrees, which was my mother's minimum requirement before we could go swimming in the lake. Most of the time, the water was so cold, you'd go in and get numb.

Morris Kerness: At one time, Duluth had about 120,000 people. About thirty years ago when they got the St. Lawrence Waterway, they thought the town would grow to about half a million. But instead, we're down to about eighty-five thousand. At one time, Duluth had a Jewish community of four thousand families. Today there are about three hundred.

Is Crystal: Hibbing used to have at least three hundred Jewish people. Only seventeen live there today.

Dan Kossoff: The exodus began in the late fifties, when the iron range began to run out of ore. The economy went down, and most of the young Jewish people moved away.

Morris Kerness: The kids grew up, made money, and moved out of town. There was nothing for you here unless your father had a store. You had nothing to come back to. You became a doctor or a lawyer and moved on.

Dinah Crystal Kossoff: Duluth was my growing-up town, and it was a wonderful, wholesome place. I couldn't walk down the street without seeing

someone I knew. All my cousins, aunts and uncles, my grandparents were there. Everybody I loved was in that town. But unlike our parents, our generation went on to college, most of us to the University of Minnesota. Afterwards, many stayed in Minneapolis or they went on. Very few came back. We loved growing up in Duluth but didn't want to stay. I guess it was just too small a town.

Blu Greenberg: My grandfather Moshe Genauer came to America in 1905, at age twenty-six. The impetus was one more pogrom in the Ukraine. He was taken out of a yeshiva and sent to America to pave the way for the rest of the family. It was during the time of the Alaskan Gold Rush. Figuring he could do better following the Gold Rush path than competing with all the other peddlers on the Lower East Side, he boarded the Northern Pacific Railroad and headed west. In Seattle, he met some Jews who needed a tenth man for a *minyán*, and he wound up staying there.

He was a peddler, buying and selling used clothing. One day he walked four miles out of town to buy some suits from a man. He came back to his little room, laid the suits out on his bed, and found a diamond brooch in one of the pockets. So he turned around and walked all the way back to the house of the man who had sold him the suits.

A woman answered the door. "I'd like to speak to your husband," my grandfather said.

She saw a man with a beard and a hat, obviously Jewish, speaking with an accent. "You can't bother my husband," the woman said. "You were here already. What do you want?"

"I didn't buy a diamond from your husband," my grandfather replied. "I bought a suit."

Her husband turned out to be the president of Rainier National Bank, and he rewarded my grandfather's honesty with an unlimited line of credit. This enabled my grandfather to open up a men's wholesale clothing business and bring over his wife, my uncle, and my father, then aged two. And that is how I came to grow up in Seattle, the beautiful city of hills. The business became successful and supported six families the next generation. Today the name Genauer is one of the names synonymous with the Seattle Jewish community.

Marc Angel: Turkish and Greek immigrants began settling in Seattle around the turn of the century. The greenery, the mountains, and water reminded them of the old country, and they were able to earn a living in the fishing industry. A handful of Sephardic Jews followed them. They made a little money, sent for their relatives, and started a small community. By 1910 there were about six hundred Sephardic Jews in Seattle, almost all of whom lived in the section known as the Central District. It wasn't a fancy neighborhood—the Jews were very poor in those days—just modest one-family frame houses, a working-class area. Japanese, Filipinos, and blacks lived there as well as Jews.

In 1908 my grandfather Angel left the Isle of Rhodes, where his family had probably been living since shortly after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, and came to Seattle. He worked as a shoeshiner and cobbler, and by 1911 earned enough to send for my grandmother and seven children. My father was the youngest and the only one born in the United States. My mother's parents came here from Turkey as teenagers, met and married here.

My mother's father used to tell the story of how when he first came to Seattle, there was no Sephardic synagogue. He and a group of Sephardim went over to the Ashkenazic synagogue. Here they were, Sephardim who spoke Judeo-Spanish (Ladino), had names like Romey and Angel, and looked like Arabs or Greeks or Turks. The Ashkenazim didn't think they were Jewish.

Finally, some of the Sephardim wrote to Dr. Mendes, the rabbi of the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue in New York. He wrote to the Ashkenazim: "Yes, these are Jews. There is such a thing as Sephardic Jews."

Blu Greenberg: When I was a child in the thirties and forties, the Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities of Seattle were separate. A marriage between an Ashkenazi and a Sephardi was looked upon almost as if it were an intermarriage. My grandparents' home was a block away from the Ashkenazic shul we attended. Halfway down the block in the opposite direction was the Sephardic shul. To us, the Sephardim were very strange—a group apart. Jews, but like a different sect.