

On the road:

Jews in Ely, Minnesota 1900–1945

By Tom Rose, PhD

Simon Bourgin, born to a Jewish family in Ely describes the town as “a village in the wilderness.” Jim Klobuchar, a columnist for the *Minneapolis Tribune* and Ely native of Slovenian descent, called Ely “a shantytown beginning, and disaster and conflict...the mingling of its ethnic clans, the lyricism of its languages and yearnings, and the clang of its colliding cultures...the struggles and ideas of the immigrant frontier, which lies at the soul of the American experience.”

Jews came to this melting pot of Catholic Slovenians, Serbians, Bulgarians, Croatians and Finnish Protestants. By the early 1900s, the expanding population included six Jewish families whose businesses and families struggled to become part of the Ely community. Ely’s Jews came from Russia, Poland and Lithuania via Superior, Wisconsin, Tower, Virginia, and Duluth, Minnesota, as well as New York City. By the end of World War II some had moved back to Virginia, Minnesota, and others to the larger cities of St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Chicago.

The Jewish families included those of Hyman Isaiah Kornfeld, Emanuel and Frannie Levy, Meyer Kaufman, Benjamin Horowitz, Joseph and Jennie Bloomenson, Samuel Cohen, Philip and Minnie Kasper Rosenbloom, Morris and Mary Bourgin, Isadore Louis and Sarah Gordon, and Harry and Sarah Burgin, George and Minnie Popkin Milavetz. (Yes, there were two Jewish families in town with similar names, the Bourgins and the Burgins).

In the late 90s I conducted in-depth taped interviews with the living children of these families, all of whom were already at advanced ages. These included Simon Bourgin, 87, Anita Gordon, 84, her brother Eddie Gordon, 73, her cousin Milton Gordon, 82, Dave and Dina Burgin, 74. I had shorter discussions with Philip Rosenbloom and Philip Milavetz. All interviewees have since passed on.

How they earned a living

Most Ely Jews started as peddlers, making friends among their customers. Often, customers and relatives loaned them the money needed to open a store. The Burgins ran a hotel in town



Abe Bloomenson, third from right, as a young boy, with his parents, and sisters Esther and Rose.

that had seven rooms. They closed the hotel in 1946, and moved to Duluth, where Harry worked for Master Furriers which was owned by former Ely businessman, Abe Bloomenson.

Morris Bourgin sold carbide lamps, heavy clothes and boots suitable for mining, and penny candy. Louis Gordon, who moved to Ely in about 1900, and Mike Gordon each had a clothing store. The two Gordons were in business together for a short time after Mike Gordon came to Ely from Virginia, Minnesota, where he had worked in the Milavetz clothing store. Mike Gordon’s clothing store closed in 1932, after which he opened a liquor store which didn’t last long. Louis Gordon’s store sold shirts, hosiery, underwear, and neckwear.

The Depression was very rough on these families and contributed to them leaving Ely for new opportunities. Even in the best of times there were too many clothing stores in Ely, and all the Jewish businessmen did a lucrative business trading furs on the side. As Eddie Gordon remembered, “you might say it was



Bloomenson's
Columbia Clothing
store in Ely, circa
late 1800s.

part of the business...when we went broke in 1932, furs became a living for us." The Burgins bought pelts for Master Furriers in Duluth run by former Ely businessman Sam Cohen. Simon Bourgin remembered that his dad sometimes had 80 mink, 100 muskrats, wolves, red and silver fox, martens, and weasel ready to go to Duluth and Canada. "My dad got into furs because Finns came in to the store with furs and asked dad if he could sell them." They bought and sold furs illegally, game wardens issued citations, and Dave Bourgin who had become a lawyer in Virginia, got them off.

Many of these families lived upstairs above their businesses. Their children attended Ely public schools and Ely Junior College where many were influenced by Professor Sigurd Olson who came to Ely Junior College in 1923 and became a renowned environmental writer. Olson had a major life-long influence on Simon, Dave, and Frank Bourgin. Simon said, "He was the lone star of my life...he was worldly...and we were kindred souls." When Simon came back from Europe after the war, he had long talks with Sigurd at Listening Point on nearby Burntside Lake. Listening Point also was the title of Olson's most famous book. Frank Bourgin taught at Ely Junior College before he left to work on his PhD at the University of Chicago. He also worked in the Bourgin family store in Virginia after they left Ely.

The Bourgins, Burgins, Rosenblooms, two Gordon families, and Milavetz families were the six Jewish families living in Ely at

one time. Their social lives included endless games of pinochle, poker and bridge, fishing and picnics, and sometimes a Seder at the Bourgins. The Burgins had a menorah and lit candles on most Fridays and Jewish holidays. The Bourgins spent many holidays walking in the woods just outside of town, sometimes with friends Sam and Eleanor Passin, who owned Lippman's Department Store in Duluth. Those who were born in Europe spoke Yiddish, but those born in the US did not. Sisters, Sarah and Leona Albert, married the Gordon men, and having been born in Duluth, they did not speak Yiddish. The Albert sisters' father was a floorwalker at the Ignatz Freimuth Department Store in Superior, Wisconsin. Simon Bourgin felt that the six Jewish families were separated from the rest of town, whereas Anita Gordon felt very comfortable with non-Jews. Simon said they were separate because they were not going down in the mine, and said, "My mother's kitchen created my sense of Jewishness." Trying to keep Kosher was a struggle because Kosher meat arrived on the train from Duluth and was often spoiled.

Anti-Semitism in Ely

Anti-Semitism was part of daily life for the Ely Jewish families. Simon Bourgin said that if you didn't run into it this week, then you would the next. According to some interviewees, the Ely priest Father Mahelscic said that the Jews killed Christ, but on the other hand he spoke Hebrew with Morris Bourgin. Robert Milavetz, one of the younger Jewish kids remembered



Dr. Sutherland and Abe Bloomenson.

by Bourgin, said that his friend told him that he killed Jesus Christ. Forty years earlier, Abe Bloomenson said a group of kids said, "Let's beat up that Jew boy and steal his stuff," while he was selling notions door to door after school.

Bloomenson, a born salesman, moved to Texas and then back to Duluth, but never forgot Ely, donating \$100,000 to help create the Ely-Bloomenson Hospital in 1958.

Dave Bourgin, who had become an attorney in Virginia, moved back to Ely to run unsuccessfully for mayor. His brother said that somebody put a banner across Camp Street saying, "Watch Out for Jews." The editor of the *Ely Miner* ran an editorial saying, "we can't have that sort of thing in Ely" and it did not happen again. Anita Gordon did not have problems with antisemitism and stayed friends with other Ely girls for the rest of her life. Some

of the boys felt that anti-Semitism was not personal. When they were called dirty Jews or kikes or Sheeny, they felt it was not directed personally at them.

Eddie Gordon delivered the paper to the baker, and every time he would say that the kike wants his money. He said, "One day I came in to collect and the baker didn't say anything, and then the baker's brother tells me... 'a guy comes into the bakery and says his name is Bill Bernstein...and I work for Pillsbury in Minneapolis, and we want you to be a customer of ours,' and the baker said, 'I don't do business with kikes.' Bernstein grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him and said, 'I am the toughest kike you ever saw and I am going to send you to the hospital if I ever hear you say that again,' and the funny thing was that the baker never said another thing to me again."

The great Depression, World War II, too many clothing stores, slowing down as they got older, and their kids attending the University of Minnesota, all contributed to an exodus of the Jews from Ely. Eddie and Milton Gordon, and Dave Bourgin joined the military, and Simon Bourgin, who had also enlisted, was working for *Stars and Stripes* in Paris. Anita Gordon was teaching school. Many of them returned to the all-school reunion in 1976 and for the Ely Centennial in 1988. Simon Bourgin came back to spend the end of his life in Ely and felt it was still a village in the wilderness.

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Tom Rose, PhD is a retired psychology professor. He and his wife, Dorcey Rose, had a cabin in Ely for 20 years starting in the mid-90s. Tom grew up in Mahtomedi, Minnesota, moving with his family to California in 1952. His great-grand father, Isidore Rose, came to St. Paul in 1856 and the Rose family became part of Minnesota history.

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1934 - 2023

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of board member Norman Pink.**

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