

FREEDOM - MORE THAN A DREAM

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It was in November 1955, at the New Central Hotel. It had come as a surprise to find that I had been investigated, and was now under final inspection. Approval or rejection would be forth coming. There was Alex and his wife Jettie, son Julius and the CPA from Florida. It had all started with a phone call from Jake Sabel. Mr. Sabel asked a number of questions that raised my curiosity, but finally he said that I would be receiving a call from Greenville, Kentucky, from a Mr. E.A. Cohen. That was all he revealed, and all that was left for me to do was to wait.

It was several days later when the call came from Mr. Cohen. He asked that I set up a meeting with him and others at the New Central Hotel. He indicated he might need my services but wasn't sure about anything. My curiosity was further aroused! In the normal situation I would have insisted on more information; but, by this time, I was caught up in something that seemed to hold the unusual. I also remembered the call from Mr. Sabel, a person for whom our community held high esteem. Under these conditions I would wait and see!

During the lunch at the New Central, the pieces began to fit together and it became clear that I was witnessing and being a part of a tradition that has been, in part, responsible for preserving a people.

Let me tell you what had happened. Mr. E.A. Cohen had been a respected and successful businessman in Greenville since 1909. He had just received a visit from the Internal Revenue Service, and was not sure just what he needed to do. He remembered that his doctor daughter, a pediatrician in Florida, had mentioned her neighbor who was a CPA. Mr. Cohen immediately called his daughter, who in turn discussed her father's needs with the neighbor. The neighbor did some research, found that a Thurman was a CPA in Hopkinsville; this he related to Mr. Cohen, and asked Mr. Cohen to check me out in Hopkinsville, while he completed his research. He also

agreed to come to Hopkinsville and interview me personally. This offer was accepted by Mr. Cohen. In the meanwhile, Mr. Cohen had contacted his friend, Jake Sabel. Mr. Sabel was completing his work when he had called.

It is a pleasure to report that I passed the tests, was approved and granted the privilege to work for Mr. Cohen. It has been over 25 years since that acceptance. It has been a happy association in which I have learned to appreciate a people, a culture, and a way of life.

Recently, the news carried a statement reported to have come from a leader of one of our largest Protestant churches regarding the Jews. A group has more recently claimed to have had a large input in the recent election. There appears that under this claim a movement has started calling for a Christian Bill of Rights. It is with a sense of fear that I react to such speech and action. It is the type of speech and action that has culminated in forcing the Jews from country after country since their dispersion from Palestine (starting under King Ahab's rule from 869 to 850 BC). The Jewish immigration to America has been a search for a land of freedom: freedom of religion and freedom for opportunity.

The year 1492 is so much a part of American history. Christopher Columbus discovered America, every school boy will tell you this date. But you ask the Jew this and he could very well tell you it was the year that Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand signed a decree in which their people were given three months to settle their affairs and to leave Spain. In a period of over 700 years the Jews had built a rich, cultured, and respected community. Spain had been conquered by the Arabs in 711 AD, and under the Arab rule the Jews had prospered. As the Christians regained control of Spain the Jews were put under more and more pressure. For over 100 years preceding their expulsion, the Jews gradually were deprived of all privileges, forced to live in Jewish quarters, and subjected to mass murder.

"Baptism or Death" became a slogan, and many chose to be baptised. Some were baptised but still practiced the old religion behind closed doors. The risk was great for these "Maranos", a name given to them meaning "pigs".

Romantic stories report that Queen Isabella pawned her crown jewels to finance Christopher Columbus' expedition to America, but the historic facts are that wealthy Jews of Spain put up the money. It is also history that the maps used by Columbus were those of a Jewish map maker, that the ship's navigator was a Jew, and that one Louis de Torres, a Marano interpreter, was the first man to land on American soil.

Under strange circumstances the first Jews settled in the new land in 1654. From Brazil they landed at New Amsterdam, New York, from a French ship, the St. Charles. It seems that a successful Jewish settlement had grown up in Brazil under the rule of the Dutch West India Company. In 1654 the Portuguese had taken the settlement from the Dutch, and issued orders that all Jews be deported. It can be said for the Portuguese that they furnished ships for passage. All were bound for Holland. One ship got separated from the others and was attacked by the Spanish. The fate of the 23 Jews aboard was redirected when the St. Charles intervened and offered them passage to America. Peter Stuyvesant, the colony governor, refused to let them land. It was only under orders from the Dutch West India Company that he relented. Some of the major stockholders of the Company were Jews. The Governor continued to interfere with the new settlers. Asser Levy became an early fighter for equal rights for the Jews in New Amsterdam. Within ten years he had the right to be a soldier, to trade, to own real estate and even the privilege to be a burgher.

The immigration of the Jews to America can be roughly divided into three periods, but in each period it was for the same reason, persecution. Sometime it was in the name of religion; sometime it was jealousy because

the Jew was always dedicated to education and self-improvement, and usually became prosperous under the most adverse conditions. Success doesn't always make a person popular, and this can be even more so when it is "a people" who insist on being different.

The first period of immigration beginning in 1654 lasted until the beginning of the 19th Century. Most were from the expulsion from Spain and Portugal. Most were educated professional and business men, and some had been wealthy. Some had even escaped to America with a part of their wealth. By the time of the American Revolution it is estimated that there were 2500 Jews in America, well established and making a large contribution to the commercial and social life of the Colonies. There were no ghettos, no barriers to owning property. Jewish merchants were busy in trade between the Colonies and with the Indians, as well as abroad. They were helping to open the West and to develop the natural resources of their new land. They joined in the fight for independence; in fact, their early experience in winning liberation from the Egyptians became an example and inspiration.

The Second era of immigration came from western Europe, mostly from Germany. It seemed that every German town joined in the harassment of the Jews. In Bavaria whole communities were forced to migrate. It was a repeat of the Spanish experience, but this time it was America that was looked to for refuge. The new arrivals used their first earnings to send home to bring over relatives and friends to the "Land of Hope".

By 1880 the Jewish population in the United States had grown to 2½ million. The later arrivals were mostly poor, and not so well educated, but eager learners. Most stayed close to the well established communities along the east coast, but some moved out into the south and middle west. Usually the ones that traveled away from the coast became merchants in small

towns and grew in wealth and prestige as the country developed.

The Third great wave of immigration came from Eastern Europe or Russia. They came as individuals, families, villages! They came always for the same reasons - to find freedom. In Russia, as in Germany, they were forced to live in restricted areas, on certain streets, in many cases forced to live behind locked gates and allowed to venture out of their areas by taking the risk of being arrested or even murdered!

It was on this third wave of Jewish immigration that my friend, E.A. Cohen came to America. He had been born in a small village in Poland in 1888, where his grandparents owned the local Inn. His parents moved to the summer resort town of Druskenike when he was one year of age. Druskenike was divided into three parts, as were most Polish towns at that time. The southern part was for the peasants, the center for the Jews, the north for the nobility and the rich. There were beautiful parks, mineral wells and a lovely river, none of which were open to the Jews. The center for activity for the Jews was the Synagogue, for worship, but even more used as the center for education.

One day when E.A. was fifteen he saw a large crowd gathered. On investigation he found a man telling about a far away land, a land of milk and honey -- a land where liberty and freedom were the rights of each person and one could have his choice of religion. This began a dream that would not go away.

E.A.'s older brother had been studying four years to prepare himself for advanced education. He had the highest grades, but was not allowed to further his education. The percentum, only one Jew for every ten Gentiles, had eliminated him. E.A. discussed his dream with Ben, and Ben was ready to join him. They would have to get their parent's permission. It was a big decision but plans were made for departure after the holidays.

The following is a short summary of the experiences of E.A. Cohen, as he came to America in search of his dream. His father arranged for their passport from Poland (a part of Russia) to Germany. The cost was \$12.50, and after three days of travel by horse and wagon they neared the border. Care had to be taken not to be caught by the Russian guards. They spent the night near the crossing point. The house was one large room, a table with four rough benches filled the center of the room, and in the corner was a large brick oven. The supper consisted of a big bowl of potatoes cooked in milk. There was one spoon in the bowl, and a loaf of bread on the table. No plates, knives, or forks were in evidence. The meal started by the host taking a bite of bread and a sup from the spoon, after which he passed the spoon to his wife. Thus the meal continued until the bowl was empty, each taking his turn. There were no beds, but when the host, his wife, son and daughter had all climbed upon the oven, the son motioned E.A. and Ben to follow. Sleep came as the oven cooled. A knock on the door early the next morning and the flight continued.

The following day they were joined by forty others, all determined to cross the border into Germany. The crossing was at night. Their guide hid them in the bushes, while he bribed the border guards. The guide instructed them to lay their coats on the ground and walk on them as they crossed the border. The last person over was to gather the coats. Thus they crossed into Germany, and to freedom from Russia!

After trudging for hours through a swamp with water to their knees, they caught a train for Insterberg and the control station, or the place better known as a "delousing plant". Here all received medical examinations, all clothes were sterilized and for two weeks they were confined to quarters.

The next stop was Berlin, then on to Amsterdam, Holland. After a three day wait they boarded the ship, bound for America! Being third class pas-

sengers didn't bother them too much, for they were sick for most of the trip. Excitement was high as the ship neared port. All were on deck, there was the Statue of Liberty holding out her hand to welcome them. But freedom wasn't to come just yet. Ellis Island meant more examinations. The Uncle that was to meet them never came. A wire had been sent ahead from the ship asking him to meet them. What had happened? In desperation they finally decided to approach the authorities and ask permission to be let in to find their uncle. Ben, being the older and the educated one, was charged with the responsibility for E.A., and they set out to find their kin. The total funds between them was six dollars, but at last they had reached the land of their dreams.

Hiring an express wagon, they found their Uncles address, only to discover that he had moved the year before. They had the address of a lady that had visited in their home in Druskenike some months before. They found her home, and after paying four of their six dollars as express fare, they were welcomed into her home. Two days later the Uncle was found. They were taken into his home, but everything was not milk and honey. The whole family worked very hard just to eke out a bare living. Soon the cousins were complaining that the "green horns" ate and slept but did nothing to help!

E.A. and Ben moved out, and went to another relative in Fall River, Massachusetts. They worked for an Uncle in his store, but found it of little reward. E.A. moved on into other jobs, working 12 to 14 hours a day just to make the necessities. America hadn't offered them the opportunities they had hoped for, but spirits remained high!

A letter came, offering E.A. a job in Hopkinsville, Ky. He was to pick up his ticket in New York. July 1, 1904 found E.A. sleeping in Italian Street Park, New York City, broke, but bound for Kentucky and his great opportunity. He went by boat to Norfolk, Virginia; by train to Princeton, Kentucky; and then to Hopkinsville on July 4, 1904.



Mrs. H. Bohn had the table set and E.A. had his first real meal since leaving Fall River. E.A. stayed with the Bohn store for a year before he and Ben decided to go it alone.

E.A. and Ben became peddlers, traveling from sun up to sun down, calling on the farmers in Logan, Todd, Muhlenberg, and Christian Counties. They slept in barns, or the woods when the local farmers would not take them in. They found that some sections did not take kindly to them. They carried their products - pots, pans, cloth, etc. - but also they carried news from neighborhood to neighborhood, and shared ideas with their customers. They made friends and gained the respect of many of the people they served.

They later opened a store in Lafayette, Kentucky, and had the beginnings of a good business. The other merchants took note, and reacted by having the Cohen's store building condemned. Not knowing how to go about repairing the building they were forced to move. They moved into a cabin at the crossroads of Roaring Springs and Lafayette. There they used the front room as a store, and the rear as bachelor quarters. They also tried their hand at farming - success didn't come. Louis, another brother, had arrived about this time. They had no success story for him, but assured him there was freedom and opportunity.

E.A. moved to Nashville for a short stay, and later to Tallulah, La. Arriving in Tallulah in July 1906, broke, but with a job, he became the clerk, baby sitter, and handy man to a Mrs. Rosenberg, the store owner. Things went well until the Panic of 1907, which, together with the hot weather, flies, and malaria, made conditions unbearable. Now it was time to move on.

It was back to the call of the road. Near St. Charles, Kentucky, the mule just "gave out" and fell into the ditch. A local farmer gave a helping

hand, and sold E.A. a horse. It was some time later in Clarksville, Tennessee that the horse died and E.A. made the decision to quit being a peddler.

He would find a good location and go into a local merchandise business. In the meantime, he would travel by train and buy hides and junk. On August 14, 1909, he arrived in Greenville, Kentucky, liked what he saw, and opened a hide, fur and junk store. Louis was passing through Greenville at the same time and added his \$106.00 savings to E.A.'s \$175.00, so it became a partnership.

The partnership lasted one year - it was broken over a girl - Jettie Brenner. Jettie was Louis' girl, and had come to visit her sister in Greenville, and also to be near Louis. E.A. met her at the train station, because Louis was held up at the business. E.A. immediately took a liking to Jettie, which of course was not appreciated by his partner, Louis. After three days, it all came to the surface. They closed the store, and had a fight behind it. E.A. started courting Jettie, and on August 23, 1910, he married her. One can give up a brother and a partner, if one wins a wife, and finds his promised land.

E.A. Cohen became a successful merchant, a respected citizen, a leader in his community, a father, and a champion of his people. He saw his dream of a life of freedom in America come true. His story and thousands like it have made this country.

Some things we Americans must remember: that we are made up of people from all nations;  
that we all came seeking a place of freedom and opportunity;  
that we are different; and  
that the freedom to be different is important to us, and any movement that would take this freedom from us must cause us grave concern.