

RUSSIAN EMIGRES - WINCHESTER'S FIRST JEWISH AMERICANS

By Ellen Knight¹

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Jewish presence in Winchester was not large. Most people having some acquaintance with Winchester history might assume there were no Jewish residents until the latter part of the 20th century.

In fact, with regard to the nineteenth century, that was the belief held by Selectman Henry F. Johnson. In 1898, when a question arose over whether a privately-owned parcel of land abutting the Catholic cemetery might be sold either to enlarge the Catholic cemetery or to supplement the land recently purchased in Woburn for a Jewish cemetery, Johnson declared he was not willing that the land be sold "to Hebrews who have no interest in the town and do not live here."

Town Meeting agreed that the land should not be used by non-residents. Within a few years, however, there was a Jewish presence. It apparently originated from Russia.

The major ethnic groups moving into Winchester at the turn of the 20th century were Italians, Irish, Swedes, and African-American. A hint of something different was discovered in the 1904 minutes of the Visiting Nurse Association,² where examples of gratitude for the nurses' help mentioned "the Russian rag-man's wife."

Russian is not a nationality historically associated with Winchester. Who was this Russian rag-man? Only six individuals or families of Russian origin were listed in the 1900 census, none was a rag-man, and none was still around ten years later.

In 1910, ten individuals or families of Russian origin were enumerated. In this year, as well as 1920 and 1930, the censuses listed not only the country of origin but also native language. Some of these Russian immigrants spoke Russian, Lettish, or Lithuanian, but others spoke Yiddish.

According to the Library of Congress, "from 1880 to 1920, a vast number of the Jewish people living in the lands ruled by Russia—including Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and the Ukraine, as well as neighboring regions—moved *en masse* to the U.S."

Though New York became their capital, many settled in Boston and its suburbs. However, they did not move *en masse* to Winchester. From 1900 to 1930, the Russian Jewish population was small, perhaps not ever exceeding 50. They did not establish their own neighborhood; their homes were often next to the Irish and Italians. Many were transitory, but a few families stayed long enough for their children to be born and educated here and to become known to the wider community.

They did not have a local synagogue. In 1910, the *Winchester Star* reported, "The Hebrews of Woburn, Winchester, and vicinity held a meeting in Woburn and formed an organization known

as the Woburn Hebrew Progressive Association. The purpose of the association is benevolent in its nature, and it is expected that all Hebrews in the vicinity will become members.”³

Charles Feinberg of Winchester was the vice-president. In 1919, it was reported that the Association was considering the erection of a synagogue in Woburn to accommodate Woburn and Winchester. Though a fund was being collected and a site was being sought, it was not until 1930 that the Woburn Hebrew Center was founded with the purchase of the office and garage of an old tannery on Green Street.

Feinberg was a junk man or, as stated in 1930, a “merchant of old metal.” Was he the Russian rag-man? Four possibilities emerge from the censuses—Feinberg, Samuel Frumson, Nathan Robinovitz, and Samuel Winer.

Reports from the Board of Selectmen’s meetings narrow the field down. In 1901, Town Meeting voted in a new bylaw requiring that a license be obtained before keeping a junk shop. Of the four men named above, Robinovitz was the first to obtain a license from the selectmen, in 1903, and was the only one to have a license at the time the “Russian rag-man’s wife” baked two pies and a chicken for the visiting nurses’ Thanksgiving. The facts that his wife bore a son earlier that month and that helping with newborns was one of the nurses’ common duties support the conclusion that Robinovitz was indeed the one.

Robinovitz, in fact, advertised himself as “The Winchester Junk Dealer,” even at a time when others were in the same business.

Feinberg’s first application for a license was rejected, apparently owing to a limit on the number of licenses available, but eventually he was also in the business. Since the Feinbergs and Robinovitzes both lived in a two-family house on Middlesex Street and Robinovitz’s wife was originally a Feinberg, they were probably related.

Family ties may have connected other Russian families. Frumson’s wife (who tragically fell victim to the Spanish Influenza) was the sister of another Russian resident, Joseph Kagan, a clothing merchant. Both families left Winchester before 1930.

In fact, all the original Russian junk dealers had left Winchester by 1940, the beginning of an era when recycling junk became a patriotic duty. In 1943, for example, when the Girl Scouts conducted a paper drive, Martha Feinberg (daughter of another Charles Feinberg, a native of Lithuania) amassed a collection which enabled her to buy six war bonds.

TAILORS

Another occupation shared by several Russian Jewish immigrants in Winchester was tailoring or retail clothing. Two names stand out, Ruben Levine and Philip Chitel.

Levine moved to Winchester in 1917, having purchased a shop on Main Street, at the site where Woolworth's would later be located. After the Locatelli building opened, he relocated his shop there and later moved to Shore Road. He was a resident of Winchester and involved with the community through the Masons and the Elks until his death in 1950. His only son, Abraham, enlisted for WWII from Winchester but afterward settled elsewhere in the state.



One of Winchester's early Jewish American residents was Russian-born Philip Chitel, shown here outside his tailoring shop on Waterfield Road, decorated for Independence Day in 1919. Though the store changed locations, Chitel established a business that served customers in downtown Winchester for 75 years.

The name of Chitel was familiar in Winchester for a longer period. A native of Odessa, Philip Chitel came to Boston about 1905 when he was about 20 years old. He worked as a tailor, a trade he had learned in Russia, and became a foreman in the tailoring shops of Maculler, Parker & Williams in Boston (for which Levine had also worked).

In 1911, he established his own business in Winchester. At his store on Waterfield Road (site of the current Post Office), he made suits to measure and did the usual alterations, repairs, and cleaning customary for tailors then.

He moved his shop a few times, eventually settling into the Lyceum Building on Mount Vernon Street. By this time, he had added ready-to-wear stock to his tailored clothing. Like Levine, Chitel belonged to the Lodge of Elks, and his friends were reportedly numbered among persons in all walks of life.



Chitel's (with the awning) on Mt. Vernon Street in 1946

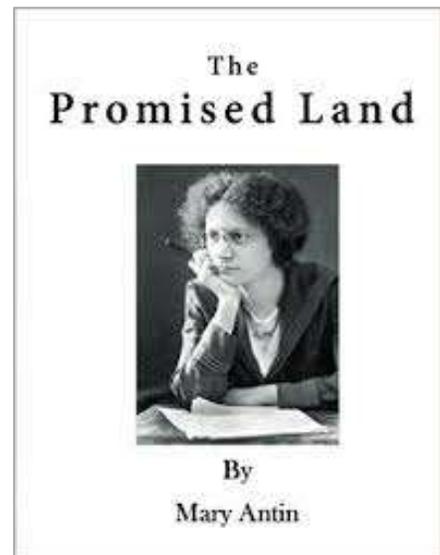
His son Jacob, a.k.a. Jack, born in Winchester, worked in the store as a youth, returned to it after college, and returned again after service in World War II. Following the death of his father in February 1950, he took it over and kept it going even after the store and his stock was burned out during his first holiday season. Although the family moved to Brookline in 1934, as a merchant he remained a familiar figure in town. Even now, many townspeople still remember the business and the men that served the community for three-quarters of a century.



Jack Chitel and his store after the fire of 1950 and 20 years later

MORE TO THE STORY

Unfortunately, the story of the first Jewish residents of Winchester does not include anything in their own words. However, one émigrée who later lived in Winchester did write the story of her family's transition from Russia to Boston and to becoming American in the years before World War I. In 1918, when she took up residence in Winchester, she was described as "the distinguished Russian authoress whose book, *The Promised Land*, is well known to all readers of English."⁴ The authoress was Mary Antin (1881-1949). When she was born, her parents, Israel and Esther Antin were living in Polotsk. Although the family once prospered there, economic necessity led her father to move to Boston where she was educated. While married and living in New York, Antin wrote her autobiography *The Promised Land*. After separating from her pro-German husband, she returned to Massachusetts and divided her time among Great Barrington, Winchester, and Boston. Here her mother died in 1919, and in 1920 she was living with her sister Ida, her native Massachusetts brother-in-law, and daughter in Wedgemere Heights.⁵ All, however, had relocated by 1930.



As Antin showed with her experiences in Boston, there is, of course, more to the story of the Jewish American heritage in Winchester. The research underlying this article has focused on immigrants from Russia in the first four decades of the last century. It is possible that the early

Jewish community, however small, had more diversity. The documentation that has come to light has been scant but serves to point out another facet of Winchester's multi-cultural society.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on May 28, 2015. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² The Visiting Nurse Association minutes are held at Winchester Hospital.

³ *The Winchester Star*, Nov. 11, 1910.

⁴ *The Winchester Star*, April 19, 1918.

⁵ Wedgemere Heights was located to the west of Cambridge Street on the hill behind #164.