

A Different Generation

At a recent family gathering, I was surprised to hear how a negative image of my maternal grandfather had been passed down to some of his great, grandchildren.

Moses Jacob Cohen, known as M.J., certainly was a strong, opinionated, and demanding man. He was of course a product of his times. And the negative was certainly not the only aspect of the man I knew. Even if he did indeed often manage to get on the wrong side of people, unlike my paternal grandfather who was a complete softie.

M.J. was born in 1887 in Kiblitch, near Uman in Ukraine, then a part of Russia. He came with his family to a remote Welsh mining village towards the end of the nineteenth century. He preserved his religious identity as he worked himself up to become a successful businessman, a civic leader who helped build, a strong, religiously committed community and family against all the odds. As a result his children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great, great, grandchildren have all followed, in his religious footsteps and Jewish creativity. That is no small achievement.

A relative called Cohen had already made the long move from Ukraine to Tredegar, the Welsh Mining village notorious for its fractious citizenry, but with a strong little Jewish community of some 20 families. M.J. started working as a pedlar taking haberdashery packs like the other Jewish merchants who had settled in mining towns and villages, trudging through the small rural communities, selling their wares on credit to housewives. Coming back exhausted on Fridays to share out their earnings with the wholesaler, the landlord, and the family and to help make up the minyan for Shabbat services. Moses was ambitious, energetic, and hardworking. He had received a rigorous Jewish education from his father but secularly he was entirely self-taught.

He was not a Cohen but a Schumacher. It is said that he changed his name because the local boss was called Cohen and M.J. figured that if he changed his name, being thought of as a relative he might get favorable treatment.

I have tried unsuccessfully to find out more about his youth and there are gaps in my records. M.J. is mentioned in the 1901 Census of Rhonda in Glamorganshire (not far away from Tredegar but more salubrious) as a 24-year-old Russian-born traveling salesman (a boarder, rather than a householder).

Yet in 1911 the local press carried photographs of the Cohens leaving town in the wake of the so-called Tredegar Pogrom. There was a miners' strike. Hunger and frustration led them to take out their anger on the Jewish shops and merchants to whom they were indebted and resented being asked to pay up at such a tough time. Some shop windows were smashed, stores were looted, and some heads and limbs were broken. Winston Churchill sent in the troops to quell it. It wasn't a pogrom. No one was killed.

Some of the family moved to Liverpool, others to Manchester where M.J. married

Annie Bornstein (born in Cracow in 1875), daughter of a comfortable, orthodox, man of substance. Back in Wales, he and his brother established a successful wholesale business in Cardiff. It was called M.J & G Cohen General Draper. There is a family legend that he sent back letters to Kiblitz headed M.J. and G. Cohen General Drapers. They knew of no one called Cohen but assumed that Draper was the new name of their relative who had joined the army and become a General. So that a family or two came to England called themselves Draper.

Sadly, a family rift caused the brothers to split. And it remained that way even after a very acrimonious split that led to them never talking again. By the time I used to visit my grandparents in Cardiff for holidays, I had no idea at all that another cluster of families called Cohen lived in the same city, the same suburb of Penylan, but were in purdah as far as we were concerned. And to the regret of his offspring, we were never allowed to connect despite living in the same city. A breach that later generations healed.

He built an elegant residence in the suburb of Penylan with a kitchen garden my grandmother loved, and a tennis court that the family enjoyed. Annie's cultivated modern tastes could be seen in the elegant Bauhaus furnishings of the home they called Mozanne (a combination of Moses and Ann). They wanted the best of both worlds for their four children, a university as well as a yeshiva education for boys and college, and a Swiss Jewish finishing school for the girls. This was quite an achievement, and progressive in those days.

He played a prominent part in the life of the Cardiff community. He was on the Board of Guardians, The Kashrus Board, the Committee for the Old Age Home, and the Representative Council. And he had a feud with the Rabbi M.D. Rogiznitsky, the Leipzig born rabbi of Cardiff. Who himself was a man of strong opinions and did not like any challenge to his authority. M.J. set up his own breakaway minyan. Where his brother Uncle Shoppy played an important role with his unfailing good temper, whimsical choice of tunes and humor. I loved spending time with him and Grandma as a child. Sure, he was strict and dictatorial, but he was also kind and playful.

After his wife died, he moved in with his son Isaac and devoted himself to his grandson's Jewish learning as much as to the business. When my father died in 1962, he was the one who stepped up and took control of the situation and arranged with the London ecclesiastical and local government authorities to have him buried at Carmel College. And when my mother was forced out of Carmel, he set up a home with her and her daughter Angela in London. Together they moved on to Jerusalem which he loved and determined never to leave. When she re-married and moved to America, very reluctantly he went to London to live out his days with his other daughter Frances Winegarten.

He was indeed demanding and not an easy person to live with. But he cared deeply for his grandchildren, supporting them both directly and indirectly as they grew up.

He helped me through yeshivah and was responsible for getting me my first job as a rabbi in Giffnock synagogue in Glasgow through his connection with

Baruch Mendelsohn the president. And he warned him not to take advantage of me because "if you pay peanuts all you will get is a monkey"! I owed him a great deal. This is why I was sad to hear from some of my nieces and nephews that they only knew of this tyrannical reputation.

One thinks of that generation as being impersonal, dedicated to earning a living and making a mark in whatever society they chose to. They went through far tougher times than we have had to. And their achievements as immigrants laid the ground for our generations. We can find fault in many of their methods, and their rigidity in following the standards, mores, and limitations of their era. But we are who we are in no small measure thanks to them.

M.J. died in 1984 at nearly 100 years old and was buried in Jerusalem.