

Beth Jacob History: Israel Cohen, Blacksmith
by Paul Carnahan

The Montpelier Historical Society has acquired portraits of two early members of Beth Jacob Synagogue, Israel and Rose Cohen. The two large, framed pencil portraits were given to the historical society by the Cohens' son, David, of Florida, through Montpelier attorney J. Paul Giuliani. The acquisition of these portraits provides an opportunity to learn about the early history of the Beth Jacob community.

Israel Cohen was a long-time Montpelier blacksmith, spending most of his career working out of a shop on Elm Street. Israel was born in 1884 in Kovno, Russia, the son of Morris B. and Fannie Cohen. Israel first shows up in the Montpelier City Directory in 1909 as a blacksmith in a shop behind the Lawrence Building (present location of Rite Aid); he roomed at 5 Hubbard Street. By 1913 his shop had moved to 23 Elm Street (later renumbered 37 Elm Street), now a parking lot near the Onion River Arts Council office.

Israel, 26 years old, and Rose Pearl Cohen, 20 years old, were married in 1913 in Burlington by Rabbi H. W. Sacks of that city. Rose had been born in Montpelier in 1893, the daughter of Phillip and Ethel (Gotler) Cohen. Phillip was a machinist at the Lane Shops in Montpelier; he had been born in 1868 in Kovno, the same town his wife was from. Phillip and Ethel came to Montpelier in 1891. Their future son-in-law, Israel, was probably a family friend. Jews from the Latvian area of Russia were known as "Litvak" in Yiddish. Kovno is now known as Kaunas, Lithuania.

By 1915 Israel, Rose, and their 7-month-old son David lived at 2 Scribner Place. Phillip Cohen had purchased a house at 205 Main Street in 1906 and at some other point had purchased the two-unit apartment building next door at 207 Main Street. In 1920 Phillip sold the neighboring property to his daughter and son-in-law. They would live there for four years until they bought the property on the corner of Elm and Vine Streets, known as 2-4 Vine Street. Israel and Rose lived at 4 Vine Street until their deaths in 1966 and 1986, respectively.

Israel Cohen's blacksmith shop on Elm Street was located next door to another blacksmith shop owned by brothers Joseph and Wilfred Pine. William Lowe of Stowe, Vermont, remembers visiting his grandfather's blacksmith shop with his brother in the 1930s and 1940s; they would also visit next door with Israel Cohen. "Israel was very tolerant of the invasion by young boys and we remember him as a very friendly man. The tools and equipment such as the tongs, anvil, and forge interested us. Very impressive was the hard physical work involved in blacksmithing, including the handling of the horses which were not always cooperative."

According to Mr. Lowe, "One practice that would be frowned upon, and even illegal, today, was the disposal of manure. It was swept into a chute that led directly into the North Branch. In the Pine shop, a loose plank in the floor was removed and the manure swept into a cellar below, which was open to the river. High water in the spring would scour out the cellar. In those days, all the raw sewage of Montpelier was piped directly into the rivers so the addition from the blacksmith's shops was rather insignificant."

Israel Cohen's frugality impressed the Pine family. Mr. Lowe's grandparents told him that Israel Cohen saved fifty percent of his gross receipts every day.

Israel Cohen was one of the last people to operate a blacksmith shop in Montpelier. He retired sometime between 1961 and 1963. Israel and his in-laws, Phillip and Ethel, are all buried in Beth Israel Cemetery in Plattsburgh, New York. Rose Cohen is buried in Green Mount Cemetery.

NOTE: Many thanks to William Lowe for the research used to write this article. If anyone has any additional information about the Cohens or other early Beth Jacob families please contact Paul Carnahan at home at 223-4016, carnahan@adelphia.net. This information will be added to the Beth Jacob archive at the Vermont Historical Society where Paul is the librarian. The collection of the Montpelier Historical Society, a separate from the Vermont Historical Society, is kept in a room above Denis, Ricker & Brown at 17 State Street. The Cohens' portraits can be viewed by appointment by calling Alan Blakeman, 223-3097.

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