

Portland's Jewish Cemetery

by Doris Sherrow, March 2000

Just over the brow of the hill on William Street, 3/10 mile east of the driveway for the Swedish Lutheran Cemetery, is Portland's tiny Jewish cemetery. I attended the ceremony in 1980 when a plaque was put up on the site during the country's Bicentennial pondering of its past. The names of those interred were read to the gathered crowd: "**Lillie Zogorskie. Ida Silterman.** [no first name] **Hoffman. Rosa Ellis. Bessie Masser. Samuel Fierberg. Charles Luntz. Samuel Markowitz.**" Old peoples' names, I thought. But it bothered me that Hoffman had no first name, so I went to Portland's vital records to investigate.

Hoffman, it turned out, was a 1-day-old baby, dead too soon to be named, born to a Hungarian shoemaker and his wife. Lillie Zogorskie was three days old; her twin brother "Jo" had survived. Samuel Markowitz was three months old, and Samuel Fierberg was fifteen months old, having been born in "Romania." Charles Luntz's death was listed in East Hampton's vital records: he was 2½. **Rabbi Morris Silverman's Hartford Jews, 1659-1970** suggests that **Rosa Ellis** may also have been a baby. Only **Ida Silterman** and **Bessie Masser** were adults; they were young housewives in their 20s. Bessie left a two-year-old daughter.

This was a cemetery of babies!

The Jewish community of Middletown had been authorized to use an eastern section of Indian Hill Cemetery since 1879. Beth Israel cemetery in Hartford had been open since the 1840s; why was a cemetery established in Portland? As it turns out, there was a small but thriving Jewish community in Portland in the 1890s.

The plaque at the little cemetery reads, "Here lie those of Jewish faith who came here from eastern Europe to seek employment in the Eastern Tinware Co. (organized in 1888) and to begin a new life. May their souls rest in peace."

Eastern Tinware, located on Freestone Avenue Extension, produced stamped and enameled tin kitchenware, decorative ware, and "self-righting cuspidors." It was owned by **Joseph Scheider**, born in Bohemia in 1841, and brought to the US when he was 7. By 1900, his occupation, as listed on the census, was "capitalist." He had purchased the factory in 1874, and by the 1890s, was New York based, with nine branches between Portland and St. Louis, Missouri. When he lived in Portland, he lived in the elegant **Erastus Brainerd** house, the easternmost of Elmcrest's three historic buildings (the one with the cupola) on Marlborough Street.

The immigration process was harrowing. As people got off the boats, anyone over the age of two was made to walk, and all were carefully observed for limps, odd behavior, or signs of mental retardation, anything which might render the immigrant unable to support himself. If any of these signs were perceived, a large chalk "X" was drawn on the person's coat, and he was held for further examination and possible deportation. Children ten or older would be deported without a parent. Many families had to make heart-rending choices: should they all go back with their disabled child? Should the father stay? Should he keep one or more of the other children with him?

If they successfully negotiated this process, there were men like Joseph Scheider, or his agents, or perhaps less scrupulous men, waiting near the docks to offer employment in their factories. Unless the immigrants had valuable skills, command of English, and the resources to set up their own business in America, the factories were their best option.

Portland's 1890s Jewish community was concentrated in the area of Freestone Avenue and High Street, and along Ingersoll Avenue and Prospect Hill, two long-gone streets which existed east of High Street and north of Freestone Avenue Extension and the tinware factory.

On March 13, 1897, **Samuel Meiowitz** and **Benjamin Enowich** purchased the land for the cemetery. Meiowitz had come from Austria and worked at Eastern Tinware. Enowich had worked at Eastern Tinware until 1891, when as a "green hand employed on a stamping press ...one day he got his hand under the drop, with the result he lost two fingers." Thus ran the article in the April 21, 1892 Middletown Press. It continued, "Since that time Ben has made a precarious living by peddling notions about town in a basket. He now proposes to collect [\$10,000] from Mr. Scheider or bring suit for the amount. Ben expressed himself to a Press reporter as in the position of one who was disposed to be lenient under the circumstances, and thought that \$10,000 was a small

sum for the disfigurement to his hand..."

Two days later, the amount had risen to \$20,000: "Ben is left handed and the loss of two fingers on that hand is looked upon as a greater source of regret than such a catastrophe would prove to the majority of men. Ben says that if some one does not kill him in the meantime he proposes to have the money; if he gets the money he will not peddle any more and if some one kills him, why of course he won't have to peddle any more. Ben is considerable of a philosopher in his way..."

Five years later, Ben was not only still among the living, but he was well-entrenched enough in the community to be one of the purchasers of the little cemetery plot. Curiously, none of his family members, nor Meirowitz's, were ever buried there. Meirowitz moved to Derby. Eastern Tinware moved to Middletown in 1902, and the Jewish community followed. Enowich, who had feared for his life in 1892, survived until 1918, running a clothing store with **Roger Kennedy**, and is buried in the section of Middletown's Indian Hill Cemetery that was set off to the Jewish community in 1879.