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Nathan L. Cohn Memoir

C661N. Cohn, Nathan L. (1896-1977)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 60 mins., 23 pp.

THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE PROJECT

Nathan L. Cohn, member of Temple Israel (formerly B'nai Abraham), discusses Springfield and the 1908 race riot, his family's furniture store, marriage, the Jewish community, and anti-Semitism.

Interview by Syma Mendelsohn, 1973

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One University Plaza, MS BRK 140

Springfield IL 62703-5407

PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a tape-recorded interview conducted by Syma Mendelsohn for the Oral History Office on October 16, 1973. Syma Mendelsohn transcribed the tape and edited the transcript. Nathan L. Cohn reviewed the transcript.

Nathan L. Cohn was born in Romania on August 10, 1896. He immigrated to Springfield, Illinois in 1904. After attending the Springfield public schools, he began working in his father's furniture business. Later, he worked as a salesman for 35 years at Stern's Furniture Company. An observant Jew from an Orthodox background, Mr. Cohn has been a lifelong member of Congregation B'nai Abraham, now Temple Israel.

Many words and phrases in Yiddish appear in this transcript. Most have been spelled and translated according to The Joys of Yiddish by Leo Rosten (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1968). Because Yiddish is a very "flavorful" language it is impossible to present all the nuances of a given word within the scope of the footnotes. The reader is therefore encouraged to check the fuller explanations in The Joys of Yiddish.

Readers of this oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

Nathan L. Cohn, October 6, 1973, Springfield, Illinois.

Syma Mendelsohn, Interviewer.

Q. Mr. Cohn, you said your father's name was John Cohn.

A. John Cohn, that's right.

Q. Where was he born?

A. I wouldn't know that.

Q. When did he come to America?

A. Well, we came to America in 1904 and he must of come about six or eight years before that.

Q. How did he happen to end up in Springfield? Did he have a relative here?

A. Well, now, you see, that I wouldn't know. When I came to this country I was eight years old and my brother was a babe-in-arms.

Q. Once your father got to Springfield what kind of work did he do here?

A. He was a cabinet maker, a carpenter. He worked for H. O. McGrew Planing Mill. Let's see, if I remember right, I don't think he came direct to Springfield. Well, I wouldn't know anything about that at all.

Q. Where were you born? In Romania?

A. I think I was born in Romania.

Q. Do you remember anything about that voyage to America?

A. Well, we got on a boat someplace---I don't know where---and we went to, let's see, Ellis Island, yes. We hit New York first see, that's Ellis Island, and then we got on a train and we [came here]. It used to be C & A, Chicago and Alton. That's over on Third and Washington, Third and Jefferson. Yes, it's still there. We got off [the train] and we started walking. My dad met us. We started walking and he met us right in front [of what is now] The Uniform Shop. We met right there and then he had a house already fixed up across the street from St. John's Hospital on Mason and . . .

Q. Was that Thirteenth Street?

A. No, that's later, that's later. That's after we got [settled]. In other words, we rented right across the street from St. John's Hospital. There were, I guess, four or five houses, all Jewish residents. Let's see, who else lived there? You know that's been so doggone long ago that I can't remember. He used to be in the junk business---Feuer.

Q. There were a lot of Jews who lived there?

A. Oh, yes. That was a Jewish neighborhood. Friedman lived a block away, you know, and a block away from that was B'nai Abraham. See B'nai Abraham was on, let's see, what street . . .

Q. It was at one time at Seventh and Mason.

A. Well, it always was there. Then this was, I think, on Eighth and Mason, where we first lived. And then, I think my dad bought the house on Thirteenth Street, 224 North Thirteenth. That was between Jefferson and Madison, it was the second house from the railroad and right next [door], north of us, which was the corner [house]—the second house from the corner—right on the corner lived a colored fellow. Very, very, nice, very nice fellow.

I never will forget during the riot¹ where he was. You know, the riot was right around there and I think there was a Jewish fellow—I can't think of his name, I used to know his name—Jewish fellow, and he went out and hollered, "All white folks hang out a white sheet and put it on their fence."

Q. So that the crowd would know it was a white family?

A. Yes. Now, I want you to listen to this. Of course, naturally, there was a lot of white folks following this fellow. This was Thirteenth and then they went west to about Eleventh Street. And they got hold of a colored fellow and they didn't have no rope to hang him. They wanted to hang him. So whoever was at the head of it looked around at the yard across the street and he seen a clothesline. So he went across the street and took the clothesline off and hung this guy up. I seen it.

Q. You saw that?

¹Springfield race riot of 1908. Ed.

A. Yes, I seen it. Put it around his neck and put it on a tree and just pulled him up. Yes, I seen all that.

Q. What happened to the colored family that lived next door to you?

A. Nothing. They got away. He hid. When everything was over, I was right on the corner of Thirteenth and Madison and seen that the bushes were moving and who comes out of there but the fellow that lived there. In other words, he hid in the bushes. I think this colored fellow was a barber.

Q. The one that hid in the bushes or the one that . . .

A. Yes, the one that hid in the bushes. But I don't know who this colored fellow [was that] they hanged. They strung him up. I seen that. Boy!

Q. How did you react to that?

A. Just looked at it and that's all. But I used to know the Jewish fellow's name.

Q. His name wasn't Abe Raymer, was it?

A. No. He hollered. He says, "All white folks hang up a white sheet in front of the house."

Q. Were there a lot of Jewish people who were involved in the riot? This fellow, Abe Raymer, who was arrested was Jewish.

A. No, that wasn't his name. It was somebody else. And then another thing, another thing I remember, is the Fishman's store.

See we had [our store] on Washington Street, 721 East Washington

Street, after Stern's took their place over at 804. That was during Prohibition. Mrs. Kanner, she owned a lot of property and she owned this 721 East Washington and that was a tavern and of course the tavern went out of business so we rented it from her. And right next door was Fishman. What the devil was his first name? And, oh, they just wrecked his place to beat the band. You know why?

Q. Why?

A. Well, white folks came in—you know, Fishman handled hardware, guns and so forth—the leaders of the gang came in there and wanted him to give them some guns and this and that. And he wouldn't do it. But colored folks came in there and they wanted that and he gave it to them. He gave [the guns] to the colored folks and they found out about that and they just went in there and wrecked his place to beat the band.

Q. Were you there when that happened?

A. No. I don't know where I was.

Q. Those must have been a couple of very tense days in Springfield.

A. Oh, they were, yes. They were. You get on Thirteenth Street . . . We lived at 224 and in the 100 block of North Thirteenth Street at Jefferson Street. There were a lot of Jewish [families]. That was a Jewish neighborhood. See, the Yaffes lived there. At that time their name was Yashewitz and they changed it to Yaffe. And I can't think of his name now, a block away a shochet² lived there. And I

²The authorized slaughterer of animals, according to kosher requirements. Rosten, Leo, The Joys of Yiddish (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 365.

think, if I remember right, the Dunases lived around there, too. They lived on Jefferson Street.

Q. Did any of these Jewish houses get destroyed by mistake in the riot?

A. I don't think so.

Q. When these colored families' houses were destroyed, were they wrecked or fired?

A. Well, I don't remember. I really don't remember. That's been some time ago.

Q. After the riot was over, there was a lot of people who were arrested, but there were three people who were charged and brought to trial. One of them was a young Jewish man, Abe Raymer. Does that ring a bell to you?

A. No, no. I know there was a Jewish fellow at the head of it, but that name doesn't ring anything. I knew there was a Jewish fellow at the head of it.

Q. When your family first came to Springfield, you and your mother and your brother, you said your father had a house all set up for you. Were there any organizations in Springfield that helped new Jewish families like yours to get settled?

A. I don't know. I don't remember.

Q. After you came to America, did you go to school in Springfield?

A. Yes, I went to Palmer School. Well, the first school I went to was McClenard School. Of course, I went to school in Romania and I was pretty good; I went up in the first grade here and it took me no time and I skipped. There was a school right next to McClenard School, I can't think of the name. You see, McClenard School didn't have first grade or second grade, it had higher grades. But the school next to it had the first grade and it didn't take me long to skip the first, second and third grade, you understand. And then I went to Palmer School. I graduated from Palmer School and went to high school.

Q. What was the name of the high school you went to?

A. Springfield High School.

Q. Same building?

A. Oh, no, this is a new building. I went to the old building. You see I think where they built this new high school used to be a cemetery at one time. I think it was. That's what I heard in talk.

Q. When you graduated from high school, what did you . . .

A. No, I didn't graduate high school. I quit high because (laughter) I figured the way they taught—I said to myself, "Heck, I know more than the teacher does." (laughter) Because I did. You know, I went through school in the old country. Their elementary school was like a high school. Then, when I came here I had in Yiddish what they call a behelfer³ who came to the house and taught me Hebrew and he used to

³Literally, a helper. In this context, a private tutor. Ed.

teach me chumash⁴ and this and that and so forth and so on.

Q. At home?

A. At home. Yes.

Q. Did B'nai Abraham have a religious school?

A. I don't know. They had a building next door to the B'nai Abraham that they used for that purpose [but] I don't remember whether they did or not.

Q. That may have been built later.

A. No, no it wasn't built later. It was right there. It was a private residence at one time and the congregation bought it and they made it into a school.

Q. But you didn't go there. You had private lessons at home?

A. I had private lessons at home, yes.

Q. Were you Bar Mitzvah at B'nai Abraham?

A. That I don't remember.

Q. Did your family go to services regularly at B'nai Abraham?

A. Yes.

Q. Was your father a member of the congregation?

⁴Torah, the Five Books of Moses. Ed.

A. Oh, yes. Yes. I notice they were more religious then than they are now. Now . . . see, when we had the furniture store, of course we kept open on a Saturday, but we didn't open up the store until we came home from the shul.⁵ We first went to services. Now we had different rabbis here. We had one who really was a good one. He had a plan and he picked out the youngsters [and said] you come Tuesday morning, you come Wednesday morning, you come, so forth and so on. See what I mean?

Q. So he could have a service every day?

A. Yes.

Q. Did your father go to services every day?

A. I don't remember.

Q. You mentioned the store. Did your family have a store?

A. Yes. It was John Cohn.

Q. A furniture store?

A. Yes, a furniture store.

Q. Is that the one you were talking about before, that was on the same block with the Fishman store?

A. Yes, next door. Next door.

Q. How long did you have that store?

⁵Synagogue. Op. Cit., p. 375.

A. Oh, we had it quite some time. It was a new and used furniture store at 721 East Washington Street. Now, you know, they wrecked all that place around there. I think Horace Mann is there.

There used to be a Boston Store here at one time. You see, I used to go out and buy secondhand furniture see. The Boston Store had a fire and I remember they had some [items] left and I bought a lot of kitchen appliances and something like that. We didn't have [any place to put] it so I put it down in the basement. And I'm just still wondering whether it's still down there now.

Q. Then you worked with your father in this store for many years?

A. Oh, yes, sure.

Q. Was the store still standing when they ripped it down to build Horace Mann?

A. Yes, yes, they ripped it down.

Q. Did you work in the store all your life?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. Till you retired?

A. No, no, that didn't last that long. See, that didn't last that long. My brother worked there, we both worked in the store and the store had an upstairs too and we lived upstairs.

Now one funny thing. I used to carry a paper route for the Journal in the morning. My route was on East Adams, East Monroe, you know

out there. So one morning I get up and of course I used to be more

religious then than I am now. I used to daven⁶ first, put on my tefillin⁷ and like that, you know, when I got through I went out. So I started to go out and my dad says to me, "Vie gast du?"⁸ "I'm going to work." He said, "No, you're not. You're going to work for me." Then he tells me that he bought Stern's out at 804 East Washington Street.

See, the Stern family . . . The father was named Abraham and the mother was named Margaret and they had Harry, Samuel, Bessie—that's the children—and Sadie. Harry was about my age and he got a job. He worked for the Wabash Railroad, something like that. Samuel was just very, very young. So they [had] this 804 East Washington Street and right on the corner there was a Joe Weissman, a tailor and repairman.

And so I started to go and my father said, "Vie gast du?" I said, "I'm going to work." He said, "No, you're going to work for me." Well, naturally he got a lease on the building and at that time we didn't have no electric lights, no gas lights. They had gasoline lights. In other words, lights—you had a machine in the corner and you pumped it up and that was the lights. So, naturally, you got to obey your father, don't you? So I worked there.

Abraham [Stern] passed away so Margaret and Bessie [were left]. Margaret was the mother, Bessie was the daughter and she was finally married a fellow by the name of Abe Routman, Bessie did. Of course,

⁶Pray. Ibid., p. 95.

⁷Phylacteries. Ibid., p. 397.

⁸Where are you going? Ed.

she passed away too. And of course there was no man there at all and it was hard. We were very friendly so my dad bought her out and got a lease on the building. When our lease ran out she refused to renew it, you understand, and that was during Prohibition so old lady Kanner [rented a building to us]. We moved over to 721 East Washington Street.

Q. Did your father have that business as long as he lived?

A. Well, let's see, how did it end? No, he got sick at some time, I don't know, the air, so he and my mother went to, not Arizona, someplace there. Well, he finally got rid of the store and moved away from Springfield. Then the boy, Harry Stern, came back in the fold and Stanley came back. Stanley Stern came back to the fold and let's see, there's another name. Well, Harry was originally . . . Stanley was Harry's son and there's another one, I can't think of his name. So they finally got this building opened up where they're at now. My brother went to work for them and he got me in there, too. So I went to work for them. I was with them for 35 years.

Q. You must have gone to work for them at the end of the 1920's or the beginning of the 1930's?

A. Yes, something like that, yes.

Q. What did you do for Stern's?

A. Salesman. I was a salesman. Well, if it wasn't for the wife I'd probably still be working for them. When I reached 65 the wife kept hollering at me, she said, "Nate, why don't you quit and get on

Social Security?" Agh! So finally when I was 66, she showed me, she said, "Nate you see here's what you draw. See Stern's pays you so much and Social Security would pay you so much." In other words, Social Security was just about the same as what my salary was so then she made me quit. That's it.

Q. How did you first meet your wife?

A. Well, I'll tell you. We had here in Springfield—I have some old pictures I'm going to get them down and show them to you—what they called social groups. We met and everything like that. That's where I met her. Of course, my folks were very orthodox but her folks no.

Q. Did her folks go to B'nai Abraham too?

A. No. No, I don't think they ever went.

Q. Did they go to B'rith Sholom or they just didn't go anywhere?

A. They didn't go anywhere.

Q. They weren't observant, they weren't religious?

A. That's right.

Q. She said the other day that you ran away to Peoria to get married.

A. No, we didn't run away to Peoria. She got that wrong. You know there used to be lodges here [like] the Court of Honor. Well, her folks belonged to Court of Honor so when they had a meeting we went there, too. The Court of Honor made a boat excursion to Peoria.

Q. Was that a Jewish lodge, the Court of Honor?

A. No.

Q. It was all people?

A. It was all people, yes. But before that you see these young folks here in Springfield got together an organization of the Jewish folks and they met. I don't know whether they played cards or whatever they did. That's how I met her.

So, naturally, we kept along, kept along, and finally we got engaged. So we got on this boat excursion to Peoria and I proposed to her. I said, "Let's get a license." So we got the license in Peoria and I said, "Let's find a rabbi." So we went to the rabbi's home and we told him what we wanted and he got on the phone and he called up a couple of witnesses and that was it! (slaps hands together)

Q. Was her family along on that boat ride?

A. Yes.

Q. So they knew what was going to happen?

A. No, they didn't.

Q. What did her father say when he found out you were married?

A. Nothing, what could he say? When we came down the only one that said anything was. . . . You see her [mother's] sister was a Salzman and they had some kind of a store up on Fifth Street. I guess it was in the paper. You know how they have it—licenses and so forth. And he

probably noticed it. When he saw me, he told me about it—old man Salzman. That is Dr. Salzman's folks.

Q. At the time that you got married, were you still working in your father's business or had you already gone to work for Stern's?

A. No, I was still in my father's business.

Q. Where did you and your wife first live when you got married?

A. We all lived in this neighborhood. We lived at 1028 West Jefferson, I think. Why don't I get that box of pictures and show you those old pictures?

Q. That would be great. (tape stops and starts)

I'm going to turn this back on and maybe you can tell me about the people in those pictures. (looking at pictures) Is that you and your wife?

A. No, that's my mother-in-law and my father-in-law.

Q. What did your father-in-law do?

A. Well, he had a grocery store.

Q. You said before that he wasn't a very religious man. How did he feel about his daughter marrying someone like yourself who was very orthodox?

A. He didn't say anything. There he is again, that's my father-in-law.

Q. This newspaper clipping is from 1919. It must be the picture.

It says "Delta Phi Sigmas." Were you in that group?

A. I don't know. (tape stops and starts)

Q. . . . your brother's wife?

A. But even today now she's more Jewish than the Jewish girls.

END OF SIDE ONE

A. My brother's wife was working at the Mill.

Q. The restaurant?

A. Yes. She was working there.

Q. Is that how he met his wife?

A. Yes. (looking at pictures)

Q. Mr. Cohn, can I ask you a couple of other questions while you look through that box? Oh, that's the picture. Is that the picture of her father's store?

A. (laughter) (looking at picture) Cheap Joe's Grocery.

Q. But you don't know if that was her father or not. Well, we'll have to ask her. He was in the grocery business?

A. Yes.

Q. When you got married, I assume that you kept kosher. Were there kosher butchers in Springfield?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. More than one or just one?

A. One.

Q. Do you remember his name?

A. Well, Oberman.

Q. He was a kosher butcher?

A. Yes. The butcher shop used to be on. . . .

Q. All the years that you went to B'nai Abraham, did the people there ever have any contact with the people at B'rith Sholom?

A. As I know of, no.

Q. Did you ever know any of those families? Were they involved in those social clubs that you were talking about?

A. No.

Q. You were talking a little while ago about Mrs. Kanner.

A. Yes.

Q. Was she the same Mrs. Kanner that started her own shul?

A. Yes.

Q. How did that happen?

A. I think she got sore at something and she built her own just a block away.

Q. Were there many people that went to the Kanner?

A. Quite a few of them because I think we got a hold of a rabbi that was too dominating or something like that.

Q. You mean at B'nai Abraham?

A. At B'nai Abraham. Yes.

Q. Mr. Cohn, in the 1950's there was some talk about maybe merging B'nai Abraham and B'rith Sholom.

A. Yes, there was some kind of a talk. Not merging, using the same building. Now you get me for instance or somebody, they wouldn't carry a Torah bareheaded, they wouldn't go into the temple bareheaded. They were talking about building. . . . Yes, they were talking about it. I remember at one time Temple B'rith Sholom was out on North Fifth Street, or something like that, in a residential district. I remember that. Yes, there was some kind of talk about a building [that would] have one place for the Orthodox and one place for the Reform.

Q. Were you in favor of that at the time?

A. I don't know.

Q. How did B'nai Abraham become Temple Israel?

A. They just changed the name when they built it out here.

Q. What happened to the B'nai Abraham building?

A. I think it's still there.

Q. At Seventh and Mason?

A. At Seventh and Mason, yes. I think it is. I think some doctor's got it.

Q. When you were a young man and later on, in your life in Springfield, did you ever feel any discrimination against the Jews?

A. No.

Q. Did most of the people you knew who were Jewish work for other Jews or did some of them work for non-Jews?

A. Oh, yes, a lot of them worked for the state.

Q. Did they ever have any problems in their work because they were Jewish?

A. Well, the trouble with me [is that] I don't go into any other people's business, you understand?

Q. Okay. That's fair enough. Were there ever in Springfield any Zionist organizations?

A. Not that I know of.

Q. Were you a Zionist?

A. I didn't go into that at all.

Q. Well, thank you for showing me those pictures. When I talk to your wife I'll have to ask her about her father's store.

A. Yes, where the devil was his store? I think it was downtown, if I'm not mistaken. I know her uncle Koratsky had a store out here.

Q. What kind of store was that?

A. Grocery store.

Q. Oh, so a lot of people in her family were in the grocery business.

A. Yes.

Q. Well, Mr. Cohn thank you so much for sharing these recollections with me.

A. That's okay.

END OF TAPE