

THE MUSEUM OF FAMILY HISTORY presents

Jews in Small Towns:

Legends and Legacies

Minnesota

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I was born on December 28, 1941, in Virginia, Minnesota. I was a first-generation American on my mother's side (Marcia Borkon Kaufman) and a second-generation American on my father's side (Carl Kaufman).

My mother was born in a small town in Lithuania. I can't remember if the town was Volkameir, Kuhrkl, or Annixt. My father was born in Virginia, Minnesota, in the home that we lived in all of my growing up years.

Grandpa Borkan settled in Superior, Wisconsin...I don't know exactly why, but I believe that it was because other family members had already immigrated there. He came to the United States alone, leaving his wife, Grandma Brina Borkon, in Lithuania with three daughters and two sons. This was the early 1900s and with service in the Russian army an upcoming requirement for the sons, the sons were the first to be sneaked out of Europe to join their father in America. The daughters escaped with their mother some few years later, after she was clever enough to realize that she could take her basic rations and use them to bake and sell bread and other food products on the black market. She managed to kniple together enough money to buy false papers once again for her family. They escaped in straw-covered wagons, and eventually they were able to get to America and then join Grandpa and the sons. Mom hated to talk about these difficult times. I believe that she witnessed one of her sisters being raped while being transported aboard a freight train during their journey.

Grandpa Kaufman was already serving as an aide to a Russian officer when he found out that he was to be inducted to serve officially in the Russian army as a part of their calvary. He picked up his family and moved to America. This consisted of Grandpa, Grandma Sarah Cohn Kaufman, and their oldest son Alec. They heard of this nice, small Jewish community that was growing in northern Minnesota. They moved with the hope of making a living there among other European Jews who had also settled there. The city of Virginia was nestled into an area known as the Iron Range. It was rich in iron ore with jobs for many, and it held a good potential for financial growth and security.

When the Kaufman family first came to America, their "real family name" was Ash. Grandpa Sam had a cousin named Jack. The newly arrived Finnish Americans could not pronounce his name correctly. Instead of saying Jack Ash, it most often sounded like Jackass. Grandpa Sam already knew that he didn't care much for that. He was a junk dealer in Virginia. A junk dealer is "a man who buys and sells." Right? Right! So Grandpa Sam Ash became Grandpa Sam "Koyf Mahn" (Koyf Mahn-a man who buys). When the name was legally changed, the spelling for our family's name became Kaufman.

Virginia was truly a mini-melting pot within the larger whole melting pot, the U.S.A .. There were people of most every religion and ethnic background. We had a very large Finnish American population. We also had a large Catholic population. We only had one "minority family" --the mother was mulatto, the father was Caucasian. There was a sense of "silent prejudice," but I don't remember racial prejudice ever being overt.

We had sixty Jewish families in our community, quite a considerable number for a small town. There were five "kids" my exact age, and quite a number of others a few year's difference from me. I am still in contact with some of these old friends to this date. As I sit here and write down my thoughts and memories, I'll share an awareness that

my brother and I had quite early on. Almost every Jewish head of household was a doctor, lawyer, business owner, accountant, or such. Just think of what that fact did for most non-Jewish people's stereotypes of us. We were the exception to the rule. My father, a most wonderful man, was not college-educated. He was a blue-collar laborer who worked his way up within our city's school system to finally reaching retirement as the foreman of Grounds Maintenance. He was a good and honest man who prided himself on his fine ethics and his quality workmanship in any endeavor he undertook. We lived very modestly. Mom was never "allowed" to work because "what would it look like to others" if a Kaufman woman had to work. We lived "on the wrong side of the tracks" so to speak. Every other Jewish family appeared to be much more affluent than we were. Really early on in life, I knew that "we were different than many other Jews in town," and at times it really hurt (mostly my mom and me) to be excluded from some social things. However, with our strong extended-family relationships, our few very good Jewish friends, and our many non-Jewish friends, we had many positive relationships.

My Grandpa Kaufman purchased a home as soon as he was able to do so. It was a duplex. He and Grandma Kaufman lived in the downstairs apartment. My immediate family lived in the upstairs apartment. Grandma Kaufman died the year before I was born. (I'm named after her.) Grandpa then moved in with my parents, and the lower apartment was rented out. Once I came along, Grandpa boarded next door with Grandma Milavetz. She was my Aunt Frances Kaufman Milavetz's mother-in-law. She, too, had lost her spouse, and agreed to have a boarder to help make ends meet.

In recent years, I've come to realize that we lived in our own little world. We truly were an extended family. On our side of the street, the block started off with one aunt and uncle and their family in the house to our right; then our home (actually Grandpa's house until his death--all of the Kaufman siblings signed the house over to my father); then Grandma (Bubbe) Milavetz with Grandpa Kaufman; then a few more houses down, Auntie Frances and Uncle Dave with their family; upstairs from them was Auntie Essie; and one more doorway away was cousin Lillian Cohn. Within a few more blocks in any direction were other aunts, uncles, cousins, and Jewish friends. All of the Jewish families knew one another and were quite "surface friendly." My parents were highly respected. They were most often included in social events in the Jewish circle of families: B'nai Mitzvot, anniversary parties, milestone birthday parties, etc. At times they were excluded, as mentioned before. The social system was (at times) a problem, because my parents felt that they didn't have the financial means to reciprocate for those social events in which they were included. Of course, we also had many non-Jewish friends. Other than family, my parents' best friends were a mixture of some Jewish and some non-Jewish.

We have a most wonderful little synagogue in Virginia. It is the B'nai Abraham Synagogue. The Jewish population of Virginia has dwindled and dwindled. There is just a remnant of what once was. The old have died and the younger generations have moved to "the big city" (Minneapolis for the most part) to go to school, work, marry, raise families, and remain. Our little synagogue is still in Virginia. It is such a marvelous little shul. Because all of the families wanted it to be there forever, work was done to get it on the Historic Landmark List. It now is! Hopefully, it will be saved forever. One of my cousins, Auntie Frances' son-in-law, Jeff Freidson, goes up to Virginia each *yontif*, and conducts the High Holiday services for whoever remains in the little community. Many of us who used to live there still contribute to the upkeep of the little shul.

The "fancier neighborhoods" of Virginia were built away from the commercial part of the city, but as I mentioned earlier, we didn't exactly live in Yuppieville. We lived very near the iron ore mines, the railroads, industry, and the downtown shopping district. I guess we never thought too much about it. It was convenient; we couldn't afford to own a car in those days, so it was "just fine" to be within walking distance of most places.

My parents were very wise people. They knew of anti-Semitism and prejudice in general. They brought us up to believe that one should not judge other persons by how they looked, the color of their skin, their religious preference, their financial standing, etc., but instead, by their degree of decency as human beings. "Look inside of a person's heart and head, and always remember that everyone has thoughts and feelings," my parents would say.

The Jewish community was quite an active one. We had Hadassah, B'nai Brith, B.B.G., B.B.Y.O., bake sales, picnics, holiday celebrations, and Shabbat services conducted by our own religious leader. Sam Jaffe was not a rabbi because he didn't have his *Smicha*, but he was "our rabbi." He prepared the boys for Bar Mitzvah and he taught Jewish studies to all kids. There wasn't time for the girls to be taught Hebrew, so we didn't have a Bat Mitzvah. I believe that we did have an incredible Jewish education via parent and family role modeling, Sunday school classes, and Wednesday evening religious classes.

I do not remember feeling any anti-Semitism, per se. I knew that my religion was different than the religion of the masses. My only horrid experience occurred in grade school. We returned to school following the winter holiday, and each child was asked to stand and tell what she or he got for Christmas. I stood and stated that I had not received

any gifts. The teacher proceeded to essentially call me a liar in front of my peers and humiliate me. I went home and told my parents about the experience, and they told me not to judge all people by this person who didn't know about people who were different than herself. They said that even though I had been taught not to lie, from now on, if ever anyone at school asked me about Christmas gifts again, just tell them about what I had received for my birthday (December 28). My father suggested that our family always remain at home and indoors on the most important Christian holidays of Easter and Christmas. He believed in the theory, "out of sight, out of mind." Many people were narrow-minded about Jews and Judaism, so it was wisest to be out of their way when they were honoring Christ. He also shared stories with me about his early years in Virginia and about an active Ku Klux Klan and cross burnings on Jewish lawns.

As I mentioned before, we were very family-oriented. We spent a great deal of time as an extended family. I can't remember a day of my childhood passing without having aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. stopping by to see us, have coffee, etc. or without us dropping in and visiting at their homes. We had an exceptionally close relationship with Dad's youngest sister, Frances, and her family. To this day, our families are closely bonded. We also spent considerable time with the few Jewish families and non-Jewish families that Mom and Dad were close to. Most of our social life was centered around Virginia, Minnesota. However, we had quite a bit of family living in Duluth. My parents were Orthodox, and thus kept a kosher home. The closest place one could buy kosher meats, Passover products, etc. was Duluth. We would travel there, perhaps once a month or so (sixty-five miles, a long trip in those days). Dad would borrow his brother's car (Uncle E.'s), and we would shop for our needs and then see family. It was Mom's family that lived in the Duluth/Superior area. Each summer a special picnic was held in Duluth. Families came from all over Northern Minnesota to attend this family picnic. It was called the "Newcomers' Picnic." The Jewish immigrants would come to talk about old times, reaffirm their Jewishness in this new, non-Jewish world, and make sure that their children were meeting other Jewish children.

Family life, education, and religious observance were the activities that stand out as being very important to my life. My parents indoctrinated my brother and me to understand that one gets nowhere in this world without a quality education. There was never talk of "if we went on to college," it was always "when we go to college." We knew how important it was to save money for our educations from the beginning of our existence. Mom and Dad knew, too. Somehow, that knowledge--their willingness to make do with less so they could give us more--our willingness to work to help make things happen--did make it all come to be. My brother (Dr. Harvey I. Kaufman) is a multiple Ph.D. with degrees in psychology, child psychology, and pediatric neural-psychology. He has authored books and developed testing devices in his field. I have my Master's Degree, plus credits toward my Ph.D. (which I decided not to finish, because I didn't have the drive to develop yet another thesis). My degrees are in the field of education. I have spent most of my teaching career (twenty-eight years), as an elementary classroom teacher. I have also authored curriculum materials, mentored teachers new to our school district, worked in administration, and taught at the University of Minnesota in the Department of Education. I am currently teaching fourth and fifth graders in an inner-city elementary school.

My family was an Orthodox Jewish family. We were *Shommer Shabbat*, observed *Kashrut*, recognized and celebrated all Jewish holidays, spoke Yiddish in our home, always participated in traditional Friday evening Shabbat dinners and services, sang and listened to Jewish music, and gave *tzadakah* regularly and, to the best of my family's ability, filled the little blue *pushka*. My father, mother, and brother could all read and write Hebrew. My father also studied Talmud, and loved relating stories that would teach lessons. We learned that good should win over evil, that all people contain some good in them, that you should treat others as you wish to be treated, that everyone has feelings, and to always look for the good in everyone. These lessons were pretty good ones and they seem to have carried us well through this lifetime.

My parents would not give me permission to date any boy who was not Jewish. That was a most difficult stipulation to honor. They always said that there are many nice people who are not Jewish, and if we open ourselves up to possible happenings, then it is more likely that they will happen. If one dates only members of their own religion, then you are assisting the fates in helping the "right thing" to happen. I must admit that I didn't always follow this rule. When I didn't, I felt torn apart inside. I was going against my parents' wishes, yet I wanted to date like a normal young person. Luckily, there was one special boy my age, and we had a really special relationship, but I did secretly date other non-Jewish boys as well. When a non-Jewish relationship seemed to get serious, I would knowingly move away from that situation.

Why were these activities important to me? Why are certain activities important to the members of any family? Because in a loving family, these are the things that are made to feel "right" and important.

My early childhood education and my first two years of college (Mesabi State Junior College) all took place in Virginia. I started college there because the tuition costs were far less than at a major university, and I could still live

at home. This meant that college was able to become a reality. Thus, I lived in Virginia, Minnesota, from my birth until the fall of the school year 1961-62.

I moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, that fall to attend the University of Minnesota. I loved the big city, being a University of Minnesota student, all of the new people, and all of the new experiences. However, in my heart of hearts, I was often still very lonely away from my parents and my extended family and friends. That move did change my whole life. I would have it no other way! I love life in Minneapolis. However, at first it was quite an adjustment. I knew very few people here. The "Minneapolis Jewish kids" were already friends in and among themselves. It was hard to break into the Jewish circles. When I visited the Hillel House, I felt like an outsider looking in. Social circles were already established, and I felt like I just didn't belong. I'm a pretty friendly sort of person and I was a very good student. Luckily I did make many lasting friendships among those people who lived in my dormitory and who attended classes with me. A few of these people were Jewish, but in all honesty most of them, once again, were non-Jewish.

When I first moved to Minneapolis, I tried to follow as many of the traditions and laws of Judaism as I could. I chose to eat meals based on the kosher food plan, I usually went home to Virginia for each of the major Jewish holidays, and I occasionally attended Friday night or Saturday morning services at one of the Twin Cities synagogues. I became involved as a U.S.Y. group leader at one of the synagogues. Little by little, it seemed to become easier if one did not keep kosher. Eventually I did drop that tradition from my life style.

Once I began teaching, my working world had very few Jewish people in it. My roommate situation varied. Most often I lived with all non-Jewish roommates. My final single-life move was to an apartment all my own. I never did return to keeping kosher.

After teaching for seven years, I took a sabbatical leave from my school system in order to complete my Master's Degree. While on leave, I met my husband-to-be. As I sit here and contemplate that time in my life, I realize that this occurrence was even more significant to my life than "just falling in love and getting married."

Once Allen and I married, I began to seek out other Jewish friends/couples more aggressively than I had ever done while I was single. We became members of a synagogue and my involvement in Minneapolis Jewish life became a high priority. Since we hoped to eventually have children (unfortunately, we were unable to fulfill that dream), I felt that it was necessary to build a circle of other Jewish couples/families. It was my opinion that within such parameters, it would be easier to model the traditions of Jewish life and Jewish education for what we hoped would be our newly burgeoning family.

As a result of these efforts, we became part of an extended family of sorts. We were one of the "founding couples" of our synagogue's Couples Club. That was almost nineteen years ago. The club was most successful, the membership grew and flourished, and to this day we are active members. The friendships made within have also strengthened with each passing year. It has become like an extended family for all of us.

I lived in my "small town" for only nineteen of my forty-nine years. Thus, I was not yet mature enough to really feel or note community changes that affected me. I know that, with each passing year, the Jewish population diminished as the young moved away to seek their futures elsewhere and as the old died away, not to be replaced.

While I was living in Virginia, the city was considered the hub of the Iron Range, the "Queen City." The mining industry gave many people jobs, and the town seemed to be quite prosperous. People of the Earth have always abused its natural resources, and thus it was with the mines. Eventually, the rich iron ore was all but depleted. Some remnant of the industry remained, but not in the same form as it once was. Many workers lost their jobs, their homes, their pride, and their positive self-images. Businesses closed, people sold their homes for a fraction of their values, and neighboring towns had to consolidate their school systems. The city of Virginia has now become a financially depressed area with more and more people moving away to seek employment elsewhere. Few new people ever move into town.

These changes sadden my heart. I have such fond memories of growing up in Virginia. I deeply regret the fact that this once flourishing city is becoming somewhat of a ghost town; that in time its Jewish population will be extinct.

Whenever my memory runs its tape in my brain, the happiest moments that I picture there are those with my family. I've already spoken of this fact before, but there is little that I can say which can adequately relate the warmth and the love that enveloped me within the womb my parents created for my brother and for me.

My unhappiest times were not based on my city or my Jewishness. They evolved out of my incredibly poor self-esteem as a youngster. I was overweight and terribly insecure. Everything outside "the womb" frightened me. I didn't want to be teased about being fat. I really liked most people, and all I ever wanted back then was for those others to like me, too, for who I was "on the inside" without concern as to how I appeared on the outside. Thank God that time, life's experiences, a broader base of knowledge, good friends, and lots of loving relationships have changed how I look at myself.

My parents were married in 1935, right in the midst of the Depression. They were very poor. Dad often worked three jobs to make ends meet. My brother was born in 1937, and I was born in 1941. We were raised in a home that believed that children were the promise of a good tomorrow; that children are a parent's most precious possession. Thus, whatever my parents could provide for us was provided; we always had food on the table and clean clothes to wear. We had enough toys. We didn't have enough for the luxuries or the extras of life, but, when there was a "a little bit extra," that money would be used to buy extra food, an extra special gift for the children, or an occasional movie with snacks. I know that when times were at their worst, my parents would eat cooked cereal and coffee for lunch and dinner in order that their children could eat a more well-balanced, nutritious meal. Yes, the financially depressed times did affect us, yet I don't think that I even realized this fact until I was an adult. Now, when I look back at old movie footage (taken by other family members who had cameras "even way back then") I am painfully aware of how much we all looked like we came from "Tobacco Road."

World War II brought new frightening realities, especially to my mom, who had already escaped from a war torn country once before ... from another time in history when the Jews were being persecuted. My father wanted to enlist, but he was rated 4-F due to a back injury. He was devastated and humiliated. He volunteered with the Civil Defense Department when he was not able to serve in active duty. We also lost family during the war--some losses through Hitler's Holocaust and some through active military duty.

In all honesty, I don't know what impact the Holocaust had on my immediate family. The whole extended family believed that childhood was not a time to have to worry about the problems of the world. Childhood was a time for playing, learning, and innocence. Though my childhood years spanned the World War II years and the aftermath of the war, I did not know of the atrocities of this war until I began to study world history in detail during my early college years.

I don't know if my family's non-Jewish friends were aware and/or believed in the existence of "a Holocaust," or of the Holocaust's effect on my family or any other Jewish family.

I have mixed feelings about growing up Jewish in a small town. In some ways, I had the best of worlds, and, in some ways, the worst. Because I grew up in a primarily Christian world, I learned to be very multi-cultural/gender fair. We were raised to see the good in everyone and to learn about the religions of others as well as our own. I knew all about Catholicism, Protestantism, and Christianity in general. I learned how to be accepting of all beliefs, while still building a very strong, inner-belief system of my own ... (much of it based on doctrines of the Jewish faith). I learned how to explain about my Jewish holidays in a way that non-Jewish people could understand without being judgmental or negative.

When I first came to Minneapolis, I realized that growing up Jewish in a small town meant that I had missed out on the camaraderie of a large group of Jewish youth growing up together, on Talmud Torah, on Bat Mitzvah training, on a feeling of "automatic belonging" to an extended Jewish community (rather than being an outsider looking in on one ... my first Jewish feelings in the Twin Cities area).

My husband and I were not fortunate enough to be able to have children of our own, thus we weren't afforded the privilege of raising any. Though I may have influenced the lives of many children as their teacher and/or friend, I would still not be able to answer a question based on my children's "growing up experiences."

As an adult Jewish person, growing up in a small town and then moving to a major metropolitan city, I must say that I have felt little anti-Semitism, regardless of where I have lived. There are those few narrow people who reside in every location known to mankind. Those people will find "a minority grouping unlike themselves" to dislike, to speak against, to harm, to threaten, and to spread evils and untruths about. I have "met my few," and have had interactions with them at times. I hope that the outcomes of our interactions changed their minds and their stereotypes of me and my people. Yet, I am wise enough and experienced enough to know that we will never change the misconceptions of some of those who love the bigotry with which they live.

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