

Refugee of Russian Pogroms Built Family and Businesses

Herbert J. Finkelstein, also known as Hyman or Hermann on Census and other government records, and H.J. or Hymie to his friends and family, died on February 29, 1964 according to the death certificate signed by his cardiologist, Dr. Paul Dudley White of the Massachusetts General Hospital. Born in Stutzin, Vilna, Russia in 1892, Hyman was 72.

While he had a famous doctor (Dr. White is regarded as the father of preventative cardiology), Hyman was not a celebrity or nationally known figure. Rather, one might regard his life as typical of many refugees who came to America to escape Russian Pogroms in the early 1900's and other immigrants in succeeding years fleeing persecution for new lives in America.

A grandson, Bobby, fulfilling a sixth-grade assignment, wrote up his interview that records Hyman's memory of why the family left Russia. He had been playing with friends in a courtyard in 1905 when men on horseback swept through the area. The boys scattered and, when Hyman re-emerged, he discovered his friends had all been killed. The following year, his father took him, then age 14, and an 18 year-old brother, to America through Ellis Island and then on to Boston. They settled in Lynn Massachusetts, an industrial area that employed many immigrants, and went to work in a factory. After a few years the rest of the family joined them.

Hyman very likely had no formal education after arriving in the U.S. according to family stories remembered by his granddaughter, Susan. He overcame that handicap, as shown through Census and other records that document his achievement of economic independence, improvement of living conditions, and growth of his family.

In 1910, at 18, the Census notes that he was a daily worker in an umbrella factory. A year later he became a naturalized citizen. The 1920 Census shows that Hyman married Mae Cohen in 1917, they had a son, Irving, in 1918, and he had become a manager in the umbrella company. He and other members of the extended Finkelstein family had moved to Roxbury and were living in the same or adjacent apartment buildings along with many other Jewish Russian immigrants.

The 1930 census documents the birth of two more children: Selma (1921) and Annette (1924). Now 38, Hyman owned his own company: Lynn Umbrella. By the 1940 Census, he had moved his family to an affluent suburb of Boston, Newton, his son had graduated from Boston Latin School and was a student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Both daughters would go on to graduate from college as well.

In 1934 Hymen created Alps Sportswear Mfg. Co. and ran it, with the help of his son after he suffered a heart attack in the mid-1940's, until his death in 1964. The company offices were in Boston, manufacturing was done in Lawrence, Massachusetts (where the business employed many new immigrants), and there was a sales office at the Empire State Building in New York City. By 1964, he had nine grandchildren, all of whom subsequently graduated from college, several of them became highly successful entrepreneurs, and four had masters' degrees in various professions. It is a legacy that would have made the 14 year-old refugee very happy.