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# The Story of Morris Seligman

by David Seligman

Morris Seligman was born in Czarist Russia in a small town he called Altinovka. His town was in the state of Minsk in the Bobruikovo district. He was one of twelve children of his father and the last of three wives. His family farmed and had some cattle and perhaps other animals.

Morris had a minimum of education: a few years in a Heder and about five years of schooling. His father and the family spoke Russian as well as Yiddish common among Jews in the area. He continued his education on an informal basis for the rest of his life.

He evidently wanted to come to America to escape the draft of the Czar to which he would be subject when he reached nineteen. He was issued a passport in October, 1912, which was good for one year. A step-sister who lived in Houston, Texas agreed to sponsor him. Morris, who was then sixteen, traveled from his town to Bremen, Germany to catch a boat to Texas.

We believe that he made the journey from Russia to Germany with a cousin, Maurice Rifkin, who had a sponsor in Philadelphia. The ship, according to his ticket, was the Cassel, of the Norddeutscher Lloyd Line, which left Bremen on March 6, 1913. The fare was 140 marks.

Morris arrived in Galveston, Texas and entered customs through that port to join his sister in Houston. It is not clear if he worked in the Southern Pacific Railroad shops before or after he joined the Army. He declared his intention for U.S. citizenship in 1916. His Certificate of Naturalization was issued while in the



Quartermaster Detachment at Camp Logan of Ellington Field. He was honorably discharged in March, 1919.

Morris then went to work for Levy Bros. Dry Goods Co. in the packing and shipping department. He stayed in Mrs. Pepper's boarding house with other young Jewish men. At some time, he met Louise Landa, who was the daughter of a widow who had moved to Houston from Hallettsville in order to support herself and two daughters.

Morris and Louise were married by Rabbi Henry Barnstone of Congregation Beth Israel of Houston on June 18, 1922. Shortly thereafter they moved to Huntsville to go into business with Louise's mother, Mrs. Dave (Dora) Landa, and her brother, Louis Cohn, in the dry-goods business.

During the time he was in Houston, Morris made a great effort to become "Americanized." He believed

that if a person wanted to be an American, then he should be acquainted with the language and the customs. Even from my earliest recollections, my father never had a Russian accent but spoke perfect English.

My folks owned a Model T Ford in Houston but when they moved to Huntsville, they had to get an Essex (which had gears to shift) to accommodate the hills. Eventually, they settled in El Campo where they opened a store of their own. They were active in the community and had many Jewish friends. They played cards and visited friends in surrounding towns. Instead of staying at home on Sundays, many times they drove to surrounding towns to visit friends and family.

My father learned to play golf at a local course. He joined the Masons and eventually became 32nd degree Shriner. My parents were successful because of their likability and they continued to run their business until the Depression took its toll in the thirties.

Ever since his childhood, Morris loved animals. Growing up, we had a cow, chickens, and other animals in the backyard for many years. Unfortunately, the depression was not kind to us and we moved several times following my father's jobs with different stores in Rosenberg and Livingston.

Our final destination was in Edna, Jackson County, Texas. There, Morris went into the business of clothing and furniture with some friends and partners. He was always a friendly person with a positive outlook. He

*continued on page 10*

was gregarious and interested in other people's ideas and business. Besides his great personality, Morris believed in treating all people equally. He was the first in town to put price tag on every piece of merchandise, so everyone knew the price and did not have to haggle.

Our store was the first to hire an Hispanic. She was our cashier and bookkeeper. Morris opened accounts for credit to a number of blacks and Hispanics; and many farmers had accounts with us. I remember one particularly bad year that he called all the farmers with accounts with us and told them to come in and add whatever they needed to get their kids ready for school. Morris learned enough Spanish to talk to Mexican customers and many years before the US 59 became a freeway and bypassed the town, many travelers from Mexico stopped to purchase gifts for home at the store.

We had our usual group of farm animals in the yard in Edna. One day, Morris came home and said he was buying seven heifers. He told my mother that he could not talk to men on the street unless he owned cows like they did.

That was our start in the cow and calf business. He eventually bought a small ranch and leased other pastures for his several hundred head. Owning land was always important to my father. He bought a farm, too. He took a delight in riding around and working the cattle with his helper. He took an active part in planning the crops to be planted by our farm tenant.

Both my parents were active in the community. My mother was treasurer of the Band Parents and raised

money selling peanuts and sandwiches at games and on the special trains. She belonged to Bridge Clubs and Garden Clubs and Study Clubs. My father was on the City Council and was an adjunct Sunday School teacher at two churches. They were generous to the community; donating to local causes, such as clubs, churches, and schools. My parents were proud of their Jewish heritage and everyone in town knew they were Jewish. When my father became a member of Rotary International, he told them only once that he did not eat pork, and he was served a substitute at all subsequent pork meals.

Morris was always concerned that we observed Jewish customs and holidays. We belonged to the Shearith Israel Synagogue in Wharton when we lived in El Campo. When we moved to Edna, we went back there for services. It was, at that time, an Orthodox congregation. The kids were all playing outside and this did not suit my father. We changed to B'nai Israel Temple in Victoria. This was an active Reform congregation with a Rabbi. My sister and I attended Sunday School regularly and always went to services. My father prevailed upon the Rabbi for me to become a Bar Mitzvah, which was very uncommon in Reform Temples in 1939.

After World War II, my father learned through his cousin in Philadelphia that a niece was the only survivor of his immediate family. All had perished in the Holocaust or in the fighting, which was concentrated in their area. For many years, he arranged to send merchandise to her that she

could trade on the black market in Russia for money.

In the sixties, Morris's cousin Maurice Rifkin, a travel agent, arranged for Louise and Morris to accompany Maury and his wife Lillian on a visit to Russia. They went to Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Tashkent where members of Maury's family lived. When they returned, I never saw my father so depressed. He was appalled at the conditions and conduct in that country. He said in the time that he was there, he never saw anybody smile.

Morris and Louise had long and happy lives, and celebrated fifty-nine years together. Morris is buried in the family plot of the Hallettsville Jewish Cemetery. At his death, he was mourned by his wife Louise; his two children David and wife Helene (Dolly), and Celine and husband Charles Kaplan; and grandchildren Paula, Marian (Sandy), and Daniel Seligman, and Lee, David, Jay, and Nannette Kaplan.

*28th Annual Gathering,  
continued from page 7*

Gittelsohn of Boston, who made the historical speech at the conclusion of the Battle for Iwo Jima during World War II. In addition, as a result of the Society honoring Odessa by having its gathering there, several Permian Basin families have joined our organization.

Please mark your calendar now and look forward to a couple of days where there is much to do and your presence is most appreciated. couple of days where there is much to do and your presence is most appreciated.