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## From Shtetl to Milltown



Litvaks, Hungarians, and Galizianers  
in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1925

Robert Perlman

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## Chapter 4

# One Family's Story: The Spiegels

Yehuda Leib Spiegel, his wife Milka, and their nine children lived in Izsnyete, a small village in the northeast of Hungary.<sup>1</sup> Between 1898 and 1921 four of their daughters and four of their sons left there and settled in or near McKeesport, Pennsylvania. It was said that the family had originally come from Galicia in Poland just on the other side of the Carpathian Mountains.

Izsnyete was located in Bereg County in an area known as Ruthenia. The town was only a short wagon ride from Munkacs 12 miles to the north or from Beregszasz 12 miles to the south.<sup>2</sup> With a population of 1,478 in 1910, Izsnyete had 30 Jewish families — somewhat larger than it had been in 1877 when its population was 1,108, of whom 127 were Jews. Greek Catholics and members of the Reform Church (Calvinist Protestants) accounted for most of the people in town. Eager to boost the percentage of Magyar-speakers, the government in its census for 1910 solemnly recorded that eight people spoke Ruthenian and 1,470 spoke Magyar.

Ruthenia was an agricultural area. In a nearby village, where one of the married Spiegel daughters lived, people grew flax for linen as well as cotton and tobacco. The Spiegels and their relatives grew some crops, which were planted and harvested by their non-Jewish neighbors on a sharecropper arrangement. But like most Jews, they were more engaged in processing and

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selling the products of the fields and forests.

Yehuda Leib sold cattle and owned a butcher shop where his sons were learning the slaughtering business. They sold kosher meat to the Jews and *trefe* (non-kosher) meat to the local priests and school teachers. The Spiegels also bought up trees at auction and hired people to cut the wood so it could be sold for boards, barrels, and firewood. They had a few cows — the daughters did the milking — and the milk they did not consume was made into butter and cheese for sale. Their relatives included a farmer, a distiller, and a baker. Another man combined farming with inn-keeping and horse trading. Another was a *yeshiva* student who helped his father sell cattle.

The Spiegels' lives were very much oriented to Munkacs, which recorded its first Jewish settlers in 1649. During the 19th century it became a regional center for Jews in Ruthenia. By the middle of the century Munkacs had a Hasidic rabbi from Galicia, a Jewish hospital, and a Jewish-owned factory, the profits of which were sent to the poor in Galicia. The Jewish men of commerce were known for their learning. One businessman endowed some houses and apartments where rabbinical students could live free of charge, two of whom were to receive wages.

The economic situation in Munkacs, a large town, differed markedly from Izsnyete. In Munkacs one-third of all the working people were in crafts and light industry and another third were in commerce and credit, domestic service, and public service. In Izsnyete nine out of 10 people worked on farms or in the woods.

The handful of Jews in Izsnyete had their own *shul* or synagogue, a Hebrew school, and ties to the Hasidic *Munkacser rebbe*. At home the Spiegel family spoke Yiddish, but could also speak Hungarian and some Slavish. Their neighbors and customers were Ruthenians, Slovaks, and Magyars. The Spiegel family's relations with non-Jews were "friendly and respectful." Like most Hungarian Jews at that time, the Spiegels felt that Emperor Franz Joseph in Vienna, who was simultaneously King of Hungary, was a good friend of the Jews.

The Spiegel children attended a public school in Izsnyete. One of the four sons explained that he went to public school for six years, six days a week, excluding Sundays but including Saturdays. Hebrew school, in a one-room *cheder*, was held before and after public school. The hours for religious studies were from 4 a.m. to 8 a.m. and after public school until 8 or 9 o'clock at night. He left school when he was 12 or 13 to work for his father. When he was 15 he got a job in a winery doing seasonal work. The starting wage was \$8 a month, of which he tried to save \$5 or \$6.

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Marriage partners came from very close by. The husbands of the four Spiegel daughters came from towns and villages near Munkacs. Two of the sons later married women born in Pennsylvania, but their families came originally from the Munkacs area. Three of the Spiegel children married first cousins, a practice — one of them said — which “kept inheritances within the family.”

Regina, whose Jewish name was Rifke, was the oldest daughter. In 1901 a *shadchan* (a professional match-maker) in Munkacs brought the Spiegels together with a Hasidic family, the Markovitzes, from a nearby village. She was then 18. The match-making was successful and the ensuing wedding of Regina and Morris Markowitz was a large one. More than 100 people came from Munkacs and its environs and stayed overnight. Tables were set outdoors under a canopy of corn stalks stretched over poles. There was dancing and celebration at night and in the morning, when the bride’s hair was cut off. (to be replaced by a wig according to tradition).

The bride and groom lived for a time with the Spiegels in Izsnyete and then moved to Kisgut, a tiny settlement nearby with only six or eight Jewish families. It was less than an hour’s walk through the woods, but located on a two-lane road where horse-drawn coaches traveled. In Kisgut the groom had built a house of stone and wood with clay floors and space for a grocery and meat store. No newspaper reached the village; twice a day a crier walked through the streets calling out the news.

Kisgut could not support a synagogue or a *cheder*. The Jews *davened* (prayed) with a Torah in the newlyweds’ home, made their matzos in one house, and cooked their *cholent* in one oven. (*Cholent* is a stew of meat and vegetables usually cooked overnight on Friday to be ready for the Saturday meal.) The children were sent to a Jewish school in Munkacs. When a child got sick the family went to consult with several Hasidic *rebbe*s and with a doctor in Beregszasz, an interesting reflection of traditional ways combined with modern science.

Life was relatively peaceful in the Munkacs area as the 20th century arrived. From all appearances the Spiegels were not wealthy, but neither were they living in poverty. Nor, as it turned out, were their children committed to the rural life of Izsnyete and Kisgut. Eight of the nine ultimately went to the United States. The sons all went as single men before the First World War and their sisters came after the war with their husbands and children.

The oldest brother, Sam, left Hungary about 1898 (the date is not certain) when he was 16. Decades later one of his brothers who was asked why Sam had come to America said, “He came because we had no future. We had noth-

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ing to do. We were poor. He wanted to come to America to make money." First Sam went to an uncle in Scranton and there he heard about "the steel mills in McKeesport and that a lot of foreign people made a living there."

Three years later in 1901 the *S.S. Fatherland* steamed out of Antwerp carrying the second brother, Joseph. He found a job in McKeesport at \$8 a month at a time when a pair of shoes cost \$2. Three years later a German ship, the *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, left Bremen with the third brother, Max, on board. Max was 17 when he arrived in New York and had \$6 in his pocket, his passage having been paid by his oldest brother, Sam. On the journey Max escorted two younger cousins from Izsnyete who were coming to live with their aunt in Scranton.

Almost 10 years had passed, during which the three brothers worked in McKeesport and sent money back to the family in Izsnyete. The fourth brother, Sigmund, decided at the age of 16 to avoid service in the Hungarian army, so he ran away, was arrested and spent a day in jail. War in Europe was not far off. What is more, there was a widespread feeling among Jews and non-Jews that northeastern Hungary was in an economic decline. In 1913 Sigmund left home on foot, a young man of 16, without a passport and only a card to show that his passage on the ship had been paid by his brothers.

As Sigmund told the story, he crossed the border into Galicia and, seeing many police officers, fled in the direction of what he thought was Germany. It turned out to be Russia. He was arrested and kept in jail for several weeks. He wrote home and his family sent his birth certificate, which was enough to win his release from the Russian jail.

Sigmund reached Bremen and again the police stopped him, but he was not arrested and was allowed to board the *S.S. Lutzow* as it sailed for America. "Then I came to Ellis Island. I had to have money to show them but I only had about a nickel. I had to send to my brothers for some money." He finally reached McKeesport, where he lived six months with each brother. He went to night school twice a week for two months, but he really learned English "by working with customers and talking with people." He went to work for his brothers in the family's grocery business: cleaning the horses, working in the store, and learning the skills of a butcher and a small businessman. The hours were from 5 in the morning to 8 at night; the wages were \$8 a month.

With the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, many families were divided between America and Europe and unable to cross in either direction. Morris Markovitz, for example, was in McKeesport while his wife Regina, was stranded in Kisgut with the children. She received no letters from her husband between 1914 and 1918. During those years, Regina ran the grocery store and kept the family going.

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It was after the war that more serious troubles began. A Communist revolution erupted in Hungary. One member of the family described the situation this way: "The peace treaty wasn't signed yet ... and we didn't know if we were going to be Rumanian or Hungarian or Czech .... The Hungarian Communists made an uproar and a disaster. Then came the Rumanians, who knew they had very little chance to stay, but the reason they came to the towns was to take stuff away .... They came into the houses, and they came into our house."

The Spiegels were not harmed, but a neighbor was shot dead for refusing to give up his horse. Another person in the family said that "the German stragglers did a lot of mischief even when Hungary was their ally; the Czech soldiers were nice, the Rumanians horrible." When the families saw any soldiers approaching the village, they sent the girls into the cornfields to hide.

When the war ended, the major powers negotiated the division of the land. In the words of one of the Spiegels, "Our part became Carpathian Russia. Beregszilvas became Hungarian. A year later it became Czechoslovakia. For a while it just kept going back and forth." Currencies were changing and one of the Spiegel boys was able to turn a good profit on a currency deal. But what was happening with the four Spiegel daughters?

After the war Regina's husband, Morris Markovitz, made the trip from America to Kisgut to bring her and their children to McKeesport. They boarded the train to Cherbourg for the first part of the journey. They took with them those staples of Jewish migrants: featherbeds and dishes (including the special ones for Pesach, the Passover holiday), their candlesticks, some papers, and kosher food for the trip. Jewish organizations fed them in Prague and Cherbourg. With the money they had made on the sale of their house in Kisgut, they were able to buy a house and store in Port Vue near McKeesport.

Within a year the other three daughters and their families were on their way to McKeesport. Rose and her husband, the *yeshiva* student from a village outside of Ungvar, opened a kosher butcher shop in McKeesport. Hilda had also married a yeshiva-educated man, Samuel Ackerman, from a village near Izsnyete. They came to Pennsylvania in 1921 and also opened a meat and grocery store.

The fourth daughter, Edith (Ida in Hungarian, Yida in Yiddish), had married and was living in Velky Lucki, Czechoslovakia, not far from Izsnyete, when the war ended. In 1920 her brother Sam, by now head of a large Spiegel clan in McKeesport, made an "affidavit of support," undertaking responsibility for Ida and Samuel Gottesman and their children, and requesting visas for them to come to McKeesport. In the affidavit, Sam Spiegel stated his income from the

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wholesale grocery business was \$250 weekly and that his assets amounted to more than \$50,000.

After the Gottesmans reached McKeesport, Sam Gottesman became a baker. Edith was at home washing white shirts for the men in the family, who were working in bakeries and butcher shops. One of the Spiegels observed that it was easier for the families who came after the war because they "had more family and they helped each other."

The Spiegels came at a time of a much larger migration of Gentiles from northeastern Hungary. From their own little village of Izsnyete, there is a record of two non-Jews who made the same journey to McKeesport. John Glagolic arrived in 1910. Mike Sepko, a Slovak, came about the same time; his wife, Rose, from a town in nearby Szatmar County, came after the war. There is no mention of contact between these families and the Spiegels in McKeesport.

In McKeesport the Spiegels were continuing the work they had done in Izsnyete — the selling of food and meat. Sam and Max opened a butcher shop which sold meat to non-Jewish customers. Max was butchering meat and selling it from a wagon. Later the brothers bought and resold feed for animals.

In time they joined with a Gentile businessman and built up a large wholesale grocery business, with its own warehouse on a railroad siding. Their salesmen took orders from independent grocers in western Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia. Sam was the inside man, ordering the food supplies and handling the logistics of moving goods from the railroad to wagons and later to trucks. Max supervised sales in and around McKeesport. The business prospered, ultimately employing about 30 people. They had five or six clerks in the office and sent four trucks out with deliveries.

The other two brothers, Joe and Sigmund, became partners in a more modest meat business. We know much more about Sigmund than we do about his three brothers. In 1919 Sigmund married a first cousin, Lena, who had been born in Scranton and was obviously an American citizen. She was 19 at the time and she immediately became involved in a citizenship problem that few people now know about.

Because of her marriage to Sigmund Spiegel, who had been born in Czechoslovakia and was an alien, Lena lost her American citizenship. This was in accordance with a law passed by the Congress in 1907 which made her an alien and a citizen of Czechoslovakia, though she had never been in that country.

Prior to 1922, a wife in these circumstances could regain her American citizenship only through her husband's death or by divorce. After 1922, a wife who had been deprived of American citizenship could become an American citizen if her foreign-born husband acquired citizenship here. Sigmund was

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naturalized in 1923, having duly sworn that he was neither an anarchist nor a polygamist; one of the other three Sigmund Spiegels in McKeesport was a witness. Soon thereafter Lena re-applied for and was granted citizenship.

This incident throws light on two aspects of American public attitudes in the early decades of this century and their expression in law. One was the vulnerable position of women whose citizenship for many years had been determined exclusively by their husbands' citizenship status.<sup>3</sup> The laws in which Lena Spiegel became entangled also reflect the growing anti-immigration sentiment that led to a virtual shut-down of immigration in the 1920s.

As a resident of McKeesport, Sigmund Spiegel liked music, went to concerts and the Yiddish theater, and read the English newspapers. He attended political lectures at election time and in 1922 voted Republican "because he thought that was the only party."

Sigmund worked all his life as a butcher. On one occasion he was asked to be a *sandek*, the person who holds the baby during a *bris* or circumcision ceremony. The story as told by his daughter is that "Aunt Rachel had prepared her professional-level strudel. Sigmund remarked that the baby was blond while the two parents were dark. He picked up the baby, whose weight had been reported as well under nine pounds, hefted the infant and declared: 'This baby weighs nine pounds!'

"The parents assured him he was wrong, but he stood by his statement. A few hours after everyone had gone home, a telephone call from the hospital confirmed the fact that the wrong baby had been circumcised. Aunt Rachel was most put out because her strudel had not been put to legitimate use."

Surveying the Spiegels as a whole, one of them had this to say: "Almost to a person, the family members were fiercely independent. To have one's own business was uppermost." In fact, pressure was put on some of the young men not to enter the professions but to go into business. Contrary to the stereotype, one young man who wanted to become a doctor was actually urged not to, but to join the family business instead.

Almost without exception the Spiegel siblings and their spouses went into the food business. It is also worth noting that they had little direct contact with the main industry of the city, steel-making, though a son-in-law of one of the immigrants became a machinist in the mill.

As the years passed, Sam became the patriarch of a large family that extended far beyond the eight siblings from Izsnyete and their offspring. His children and nieces and nephews married into other Hungarian-Jewish families, many of whom had come from the Munkacs area.

It was a complex web connected by marriages, business relationships, and

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by mutual giving and taking of help and support — not, of course, without some disagreements and frictions. There was much visiting among brothers and sisters and among aunts and uncles and cousins. The already-settled Spiegels gave the newly arriving relatives their first jobs and then, more than once, set them up in business. The more affluent ones financed higher education for nieces and nephews and even for the son of a rabbi not in the family.

Changes in the circumstances of the Spiegel families took place simultaneously along financial, residential, and religious lines. They first lived in the flat part of the city where thousands of immigrant workers in the steel plant lived and where they bought meat and groceries. Working in the store seven days a week meant bringing home \$28 a week in the early years. In time things got better and the Spiegels literally “moved up” — to the streets on the hill overlooking the steel plant, “a distinctly middle class area where the industrial leaders of McKeesport lived.” Sigmund had invested most of his savings in a home there and so, when the financial crash came in 1930, he did not lose his house.

Back in Izsnyete the family had been Orthodox Jews. Yehuda Leib and Milka came to McKeesport on a visit and their children pleaded with them to stay there. Yehuda Leib wouldn't think of it. His sons had given up observing the Sabbath. What's more, he told them, in America “even the stones are *trefe*” — not kosher! But that was not the whole story.

The older sons, Sam and Max, had indeed worked on Saturdays during the early, lean years of building their business. Eventually Sam stopped working on Saturdays as part of a turning back to Orthodoxy; to a lesser extent Max concurred. So they took in a Gentile as a token partner and this made it acceptable for the business to continue with Saturday deliveries.

The younger brothers, Joe and Sigmund, tended toward Conservative Judaism. Partly out of financial necessity they also kept their store open on the Sabbath. Joe's wife came from a very different Hungarian-Jewish background. As seen by one of their children, “one type strictly adhered to their religious beliefs and culture, speaking mainly Yiddish and being very religious. The other type, while reasonably religious, took on the Hungarian culture. They spoke Hungarian, enjoyed the Hungarian foods, and loved Hungarian music, dancing, etc. The Spiegels were the former type while Joe's wife, also a Hungarian immigrant, never learned how to speak Yiddish until after her marriage to Joe. She and her siblings were very knowledgeable about Hungarian history and art, and particularly Hungarian gypsy music, which they enjoyed until the day they died.”

In common with the rest of the Spiegels, Sigmund's family had belonged to the big Hungarian synagogue or *shul*, Gemilas Chesed. But after they moved

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“up the hill,” it became too difficult to walk there on holidays, so around 1948 they formed their own *minyán*. Later the families on the hill built a new synagogue which began as Orthodox but bent toward Conservative over time.

Joe Spiegel was a “joiner” and took an active part in the developing Jewish community of McKeesport. He was president of Gemilas Chesed congregation; a member of Temple B'nai Israel, B'nai B'rith, the Knights of Pythias, and the Good Government Club. Grace, his wife, was president of the Hebrew Beneficial Society, a service organization.

When questioned about the early 1920s, Sigmund indicated that 80 percent of the Jews were in business and that 90 percent of the city's businesses were owned by Jews — perhaps 10 percent of the Jews worked for other people and 10 percent worked in the steel mill. Except for the last of these figures, Sigmund's estimates were not very accurate, but they represent interesting perceptions of the role of Jews in McKeesport.

There were reminders of Hungary among the Spiegels and the other Jewish families from their homeland. The *csardas* was danced at weddings and the food was made the way it had been in Izsnyete. When the immigrant couples wanted to talk over the heads of their American-born children, they resorted to Yiddish or Hungarian. Some knew Slavish, which they also used with their customers.

Much as in Izsnyete, they had no close social contacts with their non-Jewish neighbors, though they encountered no anti-Semitism and the children had Gentile friends at school. But the Magyar connection was fading and fast giving way to a Hungarian-Jewish identity. Marriage to a Russian or Polish Jew simply did not take place.

Like the smashing of a glass at a Jewish wedding, the dark side of history also intrudes on the story of the Spiegels. Eight of the children of Yehuda Leib and Milka Spiegel made it to America and lived out their lives in this country. There was a ninth sibling who did not make that journey.

Avraham and his family stayed behind in Izsnyete, largely out of respect for their religious traditions. He perished in the Holocaust. The Jewish population of the area around Munkacs was devastated by the deportations carried out by the Nazis and their local collaborators. A book published in Israel (Idur, Hatalmud) describes the route that the Nazis devised for Avraham — “From Munkacs to Auschwitz.”

Contrary to the Nazis' mad wishes, his name and the circumstances of his death are remembered. Avraham's son survived the Nazis and the war and came to McKeesport. He did not stay long. It is said that the tall smokestacks of the steel mills which lit up the sky at night reminded him too vividly of the smokestacks of Hitler's Final Solution.

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Overall, looking back to Izsnyete, the Spiegels — with their Orthodox ways and close bonds with other Jewish families — enjoyed a fairly secure, rural lifestyle. They were not persecuted as were the Jews of Russia, but neither were they tied to the land in Ruthenia. The hope of improving their economic situation combined with the threat and then reality of war motivated eight of the nine Spiegel children to migrate to America.

Their lives in America consisted, on the one hand, of continuities with life in Izsnyete and, on the other hand, of drastic changes in how they came to live in McKeesport. It was not all joy and happiness, however. There were the pains of wartime separations, the uncertainties of emigrating, and the long, hard hours of work in the store to gain a secure foothold in McKeesport. Mixed with the persistence of the old ways were substantial shifts in their lives. Due to economic pressure as well as personal choices, there was a visible weakening of the old religious Orthodoxy as the Spiegels absorbed American patterns of Jewishness.

Probably the most significant changes came in the form of rapid upward social mobility. This is reflected in the educational and occupational achievements of the Spiegels, about which more will be said toward the end of the book. In at least one respect the Spiegels were not typical of the Jewish immigrants in the milltowns. In their upward mobility, they were probably above average. But the overall changes in the lives of the Spiegels, as well as the persistence of old patterns brought over from Izsnyete, were similar to those of many immigrants who left Europe to make new lives in the milltowns.