

Schaje Rabinowitz: A Yeshiva Bokhur from Pogost

by Carola Murray-Seegert

Sidney Helman Rabinowitz, whose birth name was Schaje, was born on 25 August 1890 in Pogost, a tiny shtetl six miles from the town of Byerazino, which was a market town with a port on the River Berezina, deep in the forested countryside of Belarus. Sidney was the baby of the family - the youngest of 13 children and the last of five sons born to Herschel Rabinowitz (b. Pogost 1841) and Beile Fried (b. Igumen 1848). Hersch and several of Sidney's uncles were in the lumber trade, felling trees and transporting them by river to buyers in Bobruisk. The Rabinowitz family had a vegetable garden and probably kept chickens. No doubt it was a big adventure to visit Byerazino on market days.



Main Street, Byerazino about 1905

Three of the older Rabinowitz boys, Sol, Sam and Abe, had already left for New York by the time Sidney was born. Two of his big sisters also left home at about that time: Chaie moved to Berezino when she married Isaac Zaretsky and Leah moved to Uskvala after marrying Mendel Gutin. By the time Sidney was seven years old, his sisters Molly and Rose were also in New York. His sister Mary lived in Uskvala for a while, helping Leah with her growing brood of children, but in the summer of 1900, she too left for America, accompanied by their mother, Beile. Isaac, who was eight years older than Sidney, was working with Herschel in the family lumber business, and would soon marry and move to Minsk. By the time of his 10th birthday, only Sidney and his 11-year-old sister Sadie were still living at home.

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Sidney was quick to learn, and later in life he was proud to say that in Russia he had been a *yeshiva bokhur* - a full time student of the Talmud. As an adult, Sidney relished complicated theological discussions with his son-in-law, Rabbi Barnett Brickner, and he was not shy about quizzing Albert Einstein, whom he met in Princeton N.J., when Sidney and nine fellow trustees sought Einstein's advice regarding the newly founded Brandeis University.

Sidney probably began his education at a *heder* - a one-room Jewish school that met in the cottage of the *melamid* (schoolmaster). Traditionally, boys were brought to the heder as early as age three and attendance was compulsory, at least until literacy skills had been mastered. Heder education was divided into three stages: boys first learned the *aleph bet* (Hebrew alphabet) and basic reading skills; in the second stage they



"Old house" in Pogost, photo in Google Earth 2012

read the Pentateuch; advanced students learned Gemara with commentaries. Although it was a great honor to have a son who was a scholar, few families in the shtetl could manage without their children's labor; most parents took their sons out of school between the ages of seven and nine. But Sidney completed the third, advanced stage. It is likely that he lived in with his sister Chaje Zaretsky in Berezino, so he could attend the town's highly regarded Yeshiva.

Sidney's father Hersch was the foreman of a timber company. Lumberjacking was a physically demanding, dangerous occupation, and Hersch was away from home, living in a forest logging camp, for months at a time. We know that Hersch was very religious. He carefully observed Orthodox practices, even after he and Beile moved to the US; his grandsons well remember seeing him at his daily prayers. In Pogost, the family depended on Herschel's income, so there was no way he could spend the day studying the scriptures, as more-fortunate men did.

Hersch was certainly not wealthy, but it seems that he encouraged Sidney to pursue religious education, rather than going to work like his older brothers. Sidney's mother Beile, who had accompanied Sidney's sister Mary when she immigrated to New York in 1900, did not remain in the U.S. Instead, she returned to Pogost some time after 1901. Family memory says that Beile and Mary suffered terrible seasickness on their voyage, not to mention the difficulties any Jewish woman faced when traveling in Russia during the dangerous years of the early 20th century. It is

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hard, now, to imagine what could have persuaded Beile to leave America. Would she have come back to organize Sidney's Bar Mitzvah?

Kovno (now Kaunas, Lithuania), was Sidney's last place of residence in Russia. This was a large, prosperous city on the River Vilya (below), with a population of about 60,000, of whom 40% were Jews. Three yeshivas were located in Slobodka, a village



directly across the river from Kovno; the bolder students were known to sneak across the bridge to visit libraries and "shops packed with worldly pleasures" - an excursion that could lead to expulsion from school (Zolf, 1945).

We do not know exactly when Sidney moved to Kovno, but it must have been around 1904 or 1905. Why did his parents send him so far from home? If indeed Sidney came to Kovno to attend a special yeshiva, then we can speculate about two possible answers to that question: first, Hersch may have learned about *Musar*, a practical, humanistic philosophy that emphasized the teaching of ethics - a new addition to yeshiva curriculum. Musar was first described in the 1860s by Rabbi Yisra'el Lipkin Salanter, but in the 1900s, it was being taught at the Slobodka yeshiva, across the river from Kovno.

It is a fact that, when he lived in the Bronx from 1910 -1934, Hersch belonged to the Salanter Yeshiva Society. This was a 'benevolent association' that arranged burial insurance for its members (Hersch, Beile, and the Krainin family are buried in the Salanter Yeshiva plot at Mt. Hebron cemetery). In Russia, had Hersch also been inspired by the teachings of the 'Salanter Rabbi' for whom the New York yeshiva was named? If so, then he may have deliberately chosen the Slobodka yeshiva for Sidney's further education.

Alternatively, Sidney may have come to the attention of 'scouts' who travelled throughout the Pale, recruiting outstanding boys to study Talmud, much as today's college coaches search out high school football talent. The Slobodka yeshiva had a reputation for excellence, as well as a touch of modernity. Rabbi Finkel, a former

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student of the Salanter Rabbi, headed the yeshiva in the 1900s; according to an article in Wikipedia, he sent out "special agents that would keep an eye out all over Europe for teenagers with an aptitude for both scholarship and leadership, recruiting them and bringing them back to Slobodka." In addition to teaching Musar, Rabbi Finkel "stressed the importance of outer appearance and the need for neatness and cleanliness. He did not want the image of the poor, tattered, downtrodden *yeshiva bochur* (yeshiva student) to be associated with the alumni of his institution."

A history of Eishyshok, a shtetl near Kovno, contains the following exchange:

When an observer remarked disapprovingly that the students at Slobodka were sharp dressers, "the Grandfather of Slobodka" (as the rosh yeshiva Neta Zvi Hirsh Finkel was affectionately known) replied: "So what is their crime, since they are also sharp Talmudic scholars? (Eilach, 1998)

Of course, it may be pure coincidence that Hersch belonged to the Salanter Yeshiva Society in New York, and that a famous yeshiva in Kovno followed Salanter's teachings. Still, it's a persuasive coincidence and provides food for thought.

Whatever Sidney's purpose in coming to Kovno, the move must have been quite a culture shock for a boy who had grown up in the shtetl of Pogost in the depths of the Russian countryside. But, given his personal charm and flexibility, it seems likely that Sidney was soon happily ensconced, enjoying the intellectual challenges and social stimulation of the urban environment.

In the summer of 1906, Sidney's studies came to an end. The period was characterized by increasing levels of civil unrest and violence throughout Russia. Pogroms terrorized Jewish communities between 1903 and 1906. Kishnev, Odessa and Bialystok were worst affected, but Minsk, the largest city near the Rabinowitz homestead, was also attacked. In 1904-1905 the Russo-Japanese War took the lives of many young conscripts and consumed vast economic resources before ending in a humiliating defeat. In consequence, abortive efforts at revolution took place throughout the Russian Empire in 1905, sparking widespread conflict, especially in rural areas. The Rabinowitz family must have decided, then, that Sidney's future lay in the United States, rather than in Russia.

In June 1906, Sidney travelled from Kovno to the port of Hamburg, Germany. There he boarded the S.S. Pennsylvania, bound for New York via Cuxhaven. The steamship was well worn, having already been in service for ten years; it carried 160 passengers in First Class, 180 in Second Class and 2,200 in steerage. The Pennsylvania would later serve as a troop ship in WWI.

A clerk in Hamburg recorded the following information on the Passenger Manifest:

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"Shaie Rabinowiz," age 15, profession "schoolboy," last permanent residence "Kowno," final destination "brother Sholom Rabinovicz, 59 Nicholas Str. New York." Once on board, Sidney noticed a group of passengers whom he assumed to be travelling on a separate ship. Sidney quickly realized, however, that what he had thought was another ship was actually just the First Class deck of the Pennsylvania. By the time the ship stopped at Cuxhaven to take on more passengers, Sidney had persuaded the purser to move him up from Steerage to a 2nd Class cabin.

Sidney arrived at Ellis Island on 6 July 1906, but because he was still a minor, the Port of NY officials detained him until an adult relative appeared. Solomon was no longer living on Nicholas Street, so it took the officials all day to trace him. This was the first time Sidney had ever seen his big brother, and we can assume he was overjoyed when Sol finally rescued him from the clutches of the immigration police.



From Ellis Island to the LeRoy Apartments, 133 W. 113th St. NYC

Sol most likely took Sidney straight from the docks to his home in the Le Roy Apartments, an ornate building constructed in 1904 and listed in the Directory of the

LE ROY APARTMENTS, 133 West 113th St., near St. Nicholas ave.
Tel.—\$75 Morningside.

Dr. & Mrs. Livingston.	Mr. & Mrs. S. Levy.
Mr. & Mrs. Judson.	" " Hamilton.
" " Meade.	" " Kinzman.
" " Curtis.	" " Parker.
Mrs. Fink.	" " Frey.
Mr. & Mrs. Rosenberg.	Mr. & Miss Goldberg.
" " Rabinowitz.	Mr. & Mrs. Sherwood.
" " Baker.	" " Alder.
" " Lissman.	" " Stillwell.
" " Mays.	" " Hummistein.
Mrs. R. Levy.	" " Annis.
Mr. & Mrs. I. J. Levy.	" " Pearson.
" " Lewinson.	" " Goldstein.
" " Kronengold.	" " Herod.
" " Salomans.	" " Kahn.
" " Marks.	Miss Kalm.
Mrs. Colgate.	Mrs. Weiner.
Mr. & Mrs. Spencer.	Mr. & Mrs. Ladd.
" " Thomas.	Mrs. Von Ottinger.
" " Greenberg.	Mr. & Mrs. Lewis.

Principal Apartment Houses of New York City. The Le Roy was at 133 W. 113th St. near St. Nicholas Avenue, just three blocks from the north end of Central Park, (it was still standing as of December, 2012). The building included all modern conveniences, including a central telephone switchboard (see Directory listing, left). Sol had already been in the United States for 18 years by that time. He was

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married to Rose Kostiuck, had two young children. They were living very comfortably on income from one or more delicatessens he owned. Rose employed a live-in maid to help with the children. Her name was Ida Minz, age 21, and she had come from Russia in 1902. Imagine Sidney's first impression of life in New York City - skyscrapers, switchboards and servants - quite a contrast to Pogost!

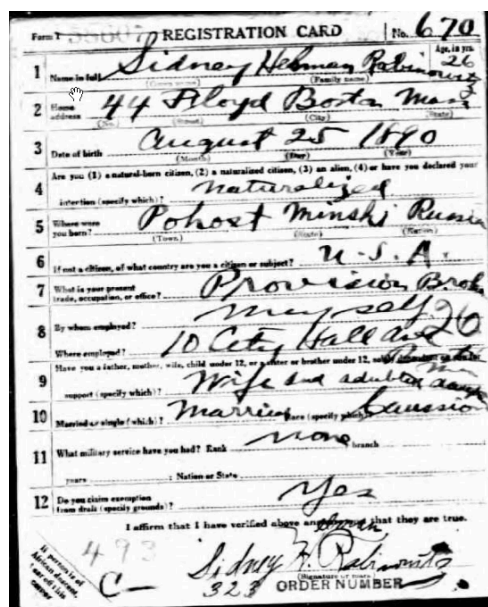
We don't know how long Sidney stayed in New York, but it was no more than four years. He probably worked for Sol and went to night school to improve his English, as other members of the family did. By April 1910, the U.S. Census shows Sidney living in Boston. There, he boarded with his brother Sam and Sam's wife Jenny Kostiuck (Rose's sister), while working as a salesman for Sam Rabinowitz' delicatessen near Boston's City Hall. Their apartment was at 34 Causeway St. in Boston, near the North Union Station. Jenny's brothers Samuel and Joseph, who also worked for Sam, lived in the same building.

Travelling from brother to brother, Sidney learned all about the restaurant business. After a year in Boston, he moved to Philadelphia, where Abe Rabinowitz, who had previously owned a delicatessen in Manhattan, was just starting a new meat processing operation. Abe's Standard Provision Company was said to be one of one of the earliest companies to make sausage on a large scale. In October 1911, when Sidney filed the Declaration of Intent to apply for U.S. citizenship, he was working for Abe as a clerk, and was living at 1821 33rd St. His brother-in law Isaac Zaretsky worked for the Standard Provision Company, too. Sidney's sister Chaie and her daughter Beisse left Byerazino in 1910 to join Isaac. The Zaretskys lived at 744 Natrona St., not far from Abe and his family, who lived at 1823 Natrona.

Within sixteen months of arriving in Philadelphia, Sidney had wooed and wed Miss Sadie Drucker, who originally came from Kiev. The couple married in Philadelphia on 21 Feb 1913. Sidney's Naturalization Petition, filed in December 1914, shows that the young couple lived at 415 Fairmount and he was still employed by his brother Abe.

By June 1917, Sidney had gone into business for himself. His WWI Draft Registration (right) shows that Sidney is self-employed as a 'Provision Broker,' based at 10 City Hall Ave.

Sidney's business, later called The Colonial Provision Co., was successful from the start. According the Boston Herald, "In the first year, with a horse and wagon, he sold 500,000 pounds of cured briskets and tongues with a value of \$150, 000."



Form 7 REGISTRATION CARD No. 670

1 Name in full *Sidney H. Rabinowitz* (Family name) Age, in yrs. *26*

2 Home address *47 Floyd Boston Mass* (City) (State) (County)

3 Date of birth *August 25 1890* (Month) (Day) (Year)

4 Are you (1) a natural-born citizen, (2) a naturalized citizen, (3) an alien, (4) or have you declared your intention (specify which)? *Naturalized*

5 Where were you born? *Pohost Minski Russia* (Town) (State) (Country)

6 If not a citizen, of what country are you a citizen or subject? *U.S.A.*

7 What is your present trade, occupation, or office? *Provision Broker*

8 If when employed? *myself*

9 Where employed? *10 City Hall Ave*

10 Have you a father, mother, wife, child under 12, or a sister or brother under 12, with whom you have support (specify which)? *Wife and adult daughter*

11 Married or single (which)? *married* (Name of spouse) *Sadie*

12 What military service have you had? Each year: _____ Nation or State _____

13 Do you claim exemption from draft (specify grounds)? *Yes*

I affirm that I have verified these answers and that they are true.

493 *Sidney H. Rabinowitz* *323* ORDER NUMBER

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The couple's first child, Samuel, was born in 1918; a second son, Paul, was born in 1919. Sadly, he only lived a few years. The 1920 Census shows that Sidney, Sadie and the two little boys lived in a 3-flat building on Warren St. in Roxbury. The same census lists Saul Kostiuck, his wife Clara and their children Frederick and May living in the same building. Saul's occupation is "Proprietor, Delicatessen Store." We don't know for sure, but it seems likely that Saul is related to Rose and Jenny Kostiuck. John Lakin and his wife Frances, who come from Vilna, as well as their children Seymour and Herman, live in a third apartment at this address. John is "Proprietor of a Restaurant," which suggests a possible connection, as well.

Rabinowitz Aaron shoerepairer 549 Dorchester av S B h 35 Alaska Rox
 " Abraham tailor h 170 Quincy Rox
 " Eli h 2 Lovett pl
 " Isaac pedler h 31 Lorne Dor
 " Jacob ironworker h 69 Morris E B
 " Jennie widow Samuel treas Rabinowitz & Co Inc 10 City Hall av h 65 Westminster av Rox
 " Max brakeman bds 35 Alaska Rox
 " Samuel carpenter h 51 Auburn
 " Samuel provisions h 205 Chelsea E B
 " Sidney H (Colonial Provision Co) 153 Blackstone h 429 Warren Rox
 " Solomon delicatessen 277 Mass av h 65 Westminster av Rox
 " & Co Inc delicatessen 10 City Hall av
 Rabita Giuseppe canmaker h 104 Prince
 " Luigi barber h 122 Bremen E B

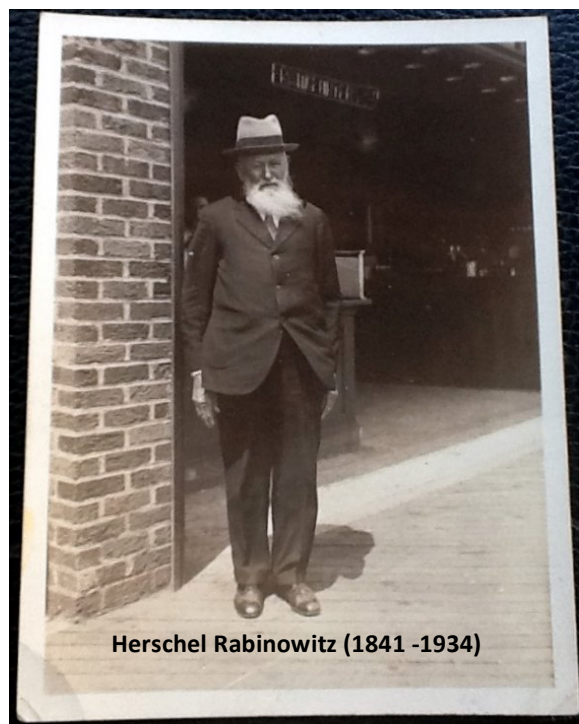
The 1920 Boston Business Directory (left) gives Sidney's work address as the Colonial Provision Co. at 153 Blackstone St.

The same page lists Sidney's sister-in law Jennie and brother Sol Rabinowitz. Jennie (now widowed) is living with Sol's family at 65 Westminster, and they are partners in Rabinowitz & Co. Inc. at 10 City Hall Ave.

In 1922 Sadie gave birth to a boy named Irving (later called 'Spike'). By 1924, the family had moved to an apartment at 358 Walnut in Roxbury. When their youngest son Bertram (later called 'Bud') was born in 1925, the happy parents brought him home to Walnut Ave. Sidney's father Hersch would surely have visited, to see the new baby.

Sidney's parents, Hersch and Beila, finally left Pogost in 1910 (it was Beila's second departure). Beile passed away in New York in 1918; until Hersch died in 1934, he would visit each of his children in turn, journeying from the Bronx to Philadelphia, and then on to Boston where his daughters Rose Liff, Mary Rosoff, and sons Sol and Sidney lived.

Biff Liff (Rose's son) remembered the sight of his grandfather praying, and also the fact that - due to sensitive teeth - Hersch ate his cereal slowly, softening it in his mouth before chewing.



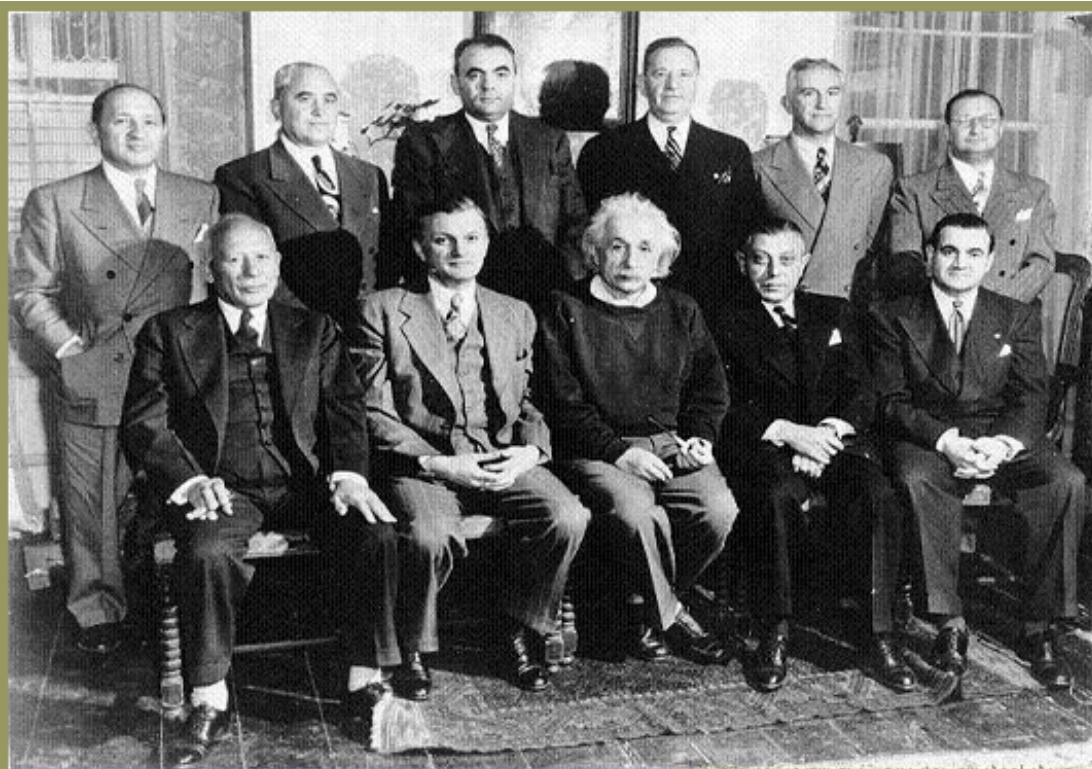
Herschel Rabinowitz (1841 -1934)

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Arnold Rosoff (Mary's son) remembered his frustration in trying to understand Hersch, who spoke only Yiddish. Bud Rabinowitz remembered the texture of Hersch's long, white beard, which he would playfully rub against Bud's face: he was the youngest son of the youngest son - the baby of the big Rabinowitz clan.



Sidney and family at the "hunting camp." L - R : Ben Rosoff, Max Rosoff, Morris Liff, Sidney Rabinowitz, Frank Rosoff, Becky Rosoff. The boy in front is Sidney's son Spike.



Courtesy of the Robert D. Farber University Archives & Special Collections
Department, Brandeis University

**Brandeis trustees meet with Albert Einstein, Princeton NJ, 1949.
Sidney Rabinowitz stands in the back row, far left.**

Sources and Additional Reading

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(This is an amazing, carefully researched portrait of one, small Lithuanian Jewish community. It is my source for information on Jewish educational institutions)

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(This site provides a complete history of the Blake Park development, supplemented by brief biographies of the owners. It includes information on the home Sidney and Sadie built at 60 Blake Rd, and is my source for the Einstein-meeting photo (above).

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