# JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CENTRAL JERSEY



Spring 2017

## **NEWSLETTER**

Nisan-Iyar

### A CHILD OF STELTON

By Nancy Forman Witham

My name is Nancy Forman Witham, and I was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey on April 17, 1952. For the first six years of my life, my family lived in the Ferrer Colony of Stelton, N.J. This is a brief and not complete story of my childhood in Stelton.

My grandfather, Boris Forman, came to the Ferrer Colony from Kazan, Russia, via St. Petersburg, London and the Bronx, N.Y. His father was appointed by

Molotoff to the position of Superintendent of Sanitation for the large town of Kazan. He had spent 30 years in the czar's army. This was unusual as he was a Jew. Boris (Bertold, Benjamin) was the product of his second marriage to Essie Wheeler, who was from a town near Kazan on the Volga River. Boris left Russia after being shot by the czar's army while living in St.Petersburg at the beginning of the 1905-6 Revolution. The soldiers rode their horses abreast and shot protesters in the street. Boris was hit in the hand

and chin by bullets that ricocheted off the buildings from another street. His first job in America was as a rolling cart pusher in Atlantic City. He was very strong and athletic.

Grandmother Rose Greenstein (Grinshtein) came from Derazhnya, Podolia, in southwest Ukraine. Rose was the oldest daughter of Gussie and David Greenstein. She had been married off to her uncle Sholom at age 16 and had a son named Abraham.

Rose ran away with Abraham and went to the Bronx. There she met Boris through his sister Manya, who was her best friend.

Boris and Rose both spoke many European languages, but their common language was English. Rose, who knew Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, and Hebrew, was a beloved woman of Stelton who cared for many children of the community as well as her

own family. In her younger days she picketed and marched. She baked a mean blueberry pie and decorated cakes with real flowers. She died of a brain aneurysm in 1945 at the age of 58, before there were medications for high blood pressure.

Grandfather was always known to carry a Jewish newspaper or the New York Times. He was an inventor who spoke fluent English and wrote all his

patents in English. Boris, who

Rose Greenstein Forman and Manya Forman Tartarsky

was once pictured in *Life* magazine, invented many things still used today, such as the opening valve on lighter fluid, salt and pepper openings used at Woolworths, valves on top of liquor bottles for pouring, sprinker systems, flower watering sprinklers, flying sprinklers, and swim gloves. He was notorious for his cantankerous behavior. Once he locked some Jehovah's Witnesses on his screened porch. Our religion at his house was politics, and a good argu-(Continued on Page 3)

#### **ARCHIVES CORNER**

In May, 1915, about 40 "anarchists" and their children arrived in the Stelton section of Piscataway, New Jersey, where they purchased a 69 acre farm and established the Ferrer Colony. The colony, which had little formal organization, was imbued with a spirit of individualism and personal liberty, combined with a recognition of the value of cooperation. Radical ideas of social reformers were discussed at length. Residents came from a variety of backgrounds, including many from Jewish families, but they believed, in the words of William Brown, the school principal, that "the imposition on immature minds of religious dogmas is one of the most vicious of all crimes."

The centerpiece and main purpose of the colony was the Modern School. A historical plaque currently found on the site states, "The Modern School of Stelton was established in New York City in 1911... in memory of Spanish anarchist educator Francisco Ferrer. It

moved to Piscataway in 1915 to provide a rural environment for the children. The Modern School, the "Living House" for boarding children, and surrounding Ferrer Colony became a center of libertarian ideas, art, and politics. Based on the principle of "freedom in education," the children took part in running the school and were allowed to make their own educational choices free of established curricula, conventional classes, examinations, and grades. It was the hope of the leaders of the colony that this educational process would foster citizens with a responsibility toward others and a profound belief that government is best when derived from the people."

The building of Camp Kilmer during World War II and the increased development of the area in the 1950s eventually contributed to the dissolution of the colony, but a number of older residents remained in their homes for the rest of their lives.

\*\*Deborah Cohn\*\*

#### THANK YOU

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# Occasion Mazel Tov on Caryn's Engagement In memory of Lewis Bloom In memory of Lewis Bloom In memory of Lewis Bloom

In memory of Dr. Norman Reitman

In memory of his mother

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ment about the world was always cooking. His house was filled with books.

Stelton was known to harbor misfits, people out of the realm of the mainstream. My grandparents' house was a boardinghouse after my grandma died. We had an African American/Japanese family residing in the living room, an African American family of four living on the sun porch, and an occasional Merchant Marine rooming upstairs, all using the same bathroom and kitchen. Years ago the women in the community would help feed and pitch tents for the World War II draft dodgers.

My parents met at Camp Kilmer in Piscataway. At that time, my mother was a WAC, in charge of the offices that processed over two million men to go overseas to the European theatre. My father, Mischa, was a lifetime dues-paying Merchant Seaman and a New Brunswick union painter. Later, when there was extreme rationing and he was virtually the only man in town with a car and gas, he drove a cab. He was extremely handsome and athletic, and my mother fell in love with him.

My mother, Isabelle Davison, came to Camp Kilmer from Westhampton Beach, New York. Her father was a detective for the Long Island Railroad, and a Jew. His family originally came from the town of Kvedarma, Lithuania, which was wiped out by Hitler. Isabelle's mother, Mary Blanche Ocame, died in 1930 when my mother was only six years old, and her father abandoned her. Isabelle was raised by her grandfather, Herbert DeForrest Ocame, the owner of Westhampton's livery service. The Ocame family arrived in Long Island in 1640 from Charlestown, Massachusetts, and my mother is a Mayflower descendent. She was raised as a Methodist, although she also joined her town's JCC. She never really fit in with the women of Stelton and felt excluded by them, but some families who were connected with Camp Kilmer lived in Stelton, and she made friends with the military wives.

My family, meaning Mom, Dad, and my brother, Conrad, lived in Josh Shapiro's house, one of three houses we rented in Stelton. The house had buried teeth we would dig up. Josh owned a dental lab but wanted to be an artist. Next door lived the Morrels, an African American man and his war bride, a redhaired lady who spoke only Italian. My first Stelton memory was that of lying under a loom and hearing the noise a loom makes. The woman at the loom was Lisa, our community nurse, who took care of my dad when he was very ill.

Women from the community would come over with large ceramic bowls and pick strawberries in our back yard. All the women who had known my grandmother loved me, and would pinch my cheek and say how much I looked like her. One woman used to give me windmill cookies. She was the widow of a Spanish American War veteran. She was always in the Memorial Day parade. One day someone found her murdered in her house.

The Modern School was the hub of the community and the reason why it existed. It was founded after the teachings of Fernando Ferrer, a brilliant Spanish educator who was imprisoned and killed by the Spanish government. Ferrer's teachings were similar to those of Maria Montessori. The principal of the school was named Alexander Ferm, and he and his wife taught at the school. A famous teacher there, Will Durant, wrote *The History of the World*. Many prominent people came to Stelton for seminars. Isadora Duncan came and danced. We had a garage built by Frank Lloyd Wright's students.

My dad told me a story about how one day he was at the school and he asked his teacher if he could go outside. She said yes, and while he was outside, he found a snake—maybe from the brook that ran along-side the school. He took the snake and decided for a joke he would put it in the pump. He thought if some-one used the pump the snake would pop out! Later, his teacher came to use the pump and it was broken. My dad was mortified.

Stelton was ringed by woods. If you walked a certain direction, you surely thought you were in a wilderness. In the woods there were the remmants of a button factory where we could dig in the mud and find buttons. The mothers would take us kids in the winter to skate on the pond in the wood.

Of course I must mention Gusta and Sam Goldman's (continued on page 7)

# The Ferrer Colony In The News

New Brunswick Daily Home News, April 10, 1915 Anarchist Colony Near Stelton is Booming

The dedication of the new branch of the Francisco Ferrer Association, located at Stelton, will take place May 2, when addresses will be given by prominent Anarchists throughout the United States. This new colony will be composed of about 40 Anarchists and their children. "The really important factors in the organization of this colony." said Mr. Kelly, "are the following: First, the inherent desire of most people, and particularly radicals, to live close

to nature; second, the Ferrer School; third, the proximity of the colony site to the city....The members of this colony are Anarchists or people broad enough to work with them. In proportion to their interests and desires they will cooperate with each other. The individual will get his plot of land, and after it has been staked off he can do with it as he pleases."

Sunday Times, The New Brunswick, May 21, 1916

#### Modern School at Stelton Uses Methods That Are "Taboo" in Other Institutions

The Modern School and Ferrer Colony near Stelton has made considerable progress since it was established there a year ago. The school itself was the result of a feeling on the part of its organizers that a free school is the foundation of a free society, and without the one the

other cannot come into existence, much less endure. The founders of the Ferrer school hold that "free" and "compulsory" education is a misnomer and absurd on the face of it. A free school, with them, means a place where children come to be educated without compulsion and where what is usually understood as "discipline" is not employed.

They also teach things and use methods which are "taboo" in State and Parochial schools. When it is understood that the founders of the Modern School are Anarchists and that those responsible for its instruction accept fully the teachings of evolutionary science and are acquainted with Sociology, it will be readily understood that "patriotism" and "religion" are not taught as dogmas, as fixed things to be believed.

While most of the interest and activity has centered around the children's school, the adults are not

neglected. Weekly meetings were held all last summer, and lectures on social themes and topics of the day given and discussed. These lectures and discussion were open to all, and as the colony has more than doubled since last summer, they will shortly be resumed. Social evenings, communal dinners, and children's theatricals were some of the features of this group of "peculiar people."

The Colonists wish it to be understood that they antagonize nothing but ignorance, superstition, and in-

> justice. Their opponents of today are potential comrades of tomorrow, and their one desire is to leave the world better than they found it, and while the tack is pretentious, they are vain enough to insist that they enjoy

working for such a cause. The Daily Home News. New Brunswick, July 23, 1915

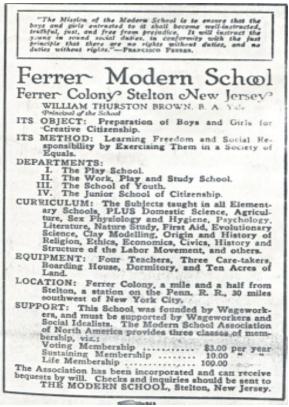
Flowing Hair and Bare Legs Marks of Stelton "Reds"

The proverbial "tempest in a teapot" has nothing on Stelton and its colony of anarchists. Deep-dyed anarchy is rampant at the Ferrer School, near Stelton, and yet Stelton is quite unconcerned about it and seems to be able to go on with its ordinary affairs quite as if its inhabitants were all the most stand-pat ultra conservatives.

In fact, when a Home News reporter visited the anarchist school there yesterday, he had considerable trouble in finding the place, and stumbled on it almost by accident. The only conspicuous thing in the whole neighborhood is the red flag floating over the Socialist community across the road from the Ferrer School.

Where were the long-haired, wild-eyed Siberian exiles crouching over their bombs, the inevitable properties of an Anarchist colony in the "movies"? Apparently they must have taken a day off, for nothing could be seen but a crowd of happy, barelegged, sun-browned children playing about in a garden, attended by two or three teachers.

The scene was somewhat unconventional, it is true, in that the women teachers wore their hair hanging down their backs, and it might be suspected that one or two were barefoot, but the whole scene seemed much



#### (Continued from previous page)

more like a colony of devotees of nature than of anarchy....Whatever may be their ideas, no matter what dangerous principles they may uphold and instill into the minds of their pupils, there is little on the outside that would stamp them as dangerous to the community at large.



The Sunday Times, New Brunswick, March 21, 1926
Sunday Times Reporter Visits Modern School in
Stelton Colony and Writes Impressions of Unique
Educational Methods

Upon entering the school, one will be surprised not to see desks and blackboards, the very essence of a class room. In their stead may be seen looms, yarn, and woven products. The pupils spend most of their time in artistic work. From the cloth they weave, the girls make most of the clothing they wear.

In another room is the art class. The work of these young artists is positively amazing. Some of the pictures were on exhibition at a recent exhibit in New York....The boys of the school are most usually found in the carpentry shop. This room contains all the machinery used in a modern carpentry shop. In one corner of the shop is a blow forge. In the shop the boys make anything they choose.

The academic work is done in the school library. In the library are only the best books published and these children actually read and understand them. The book most used in the library is the "Book of Knowledge." Other books are on science, geography, history and the best fiction stories.

The children of the Modern School are the most keen witted and intelligent the reporter has ever talked to. The children's ages are from four to fourteen. The children come to school at any time they please but they must leave at 4:30 o'clock. The reporter was astounded to see the teachers round up the children and compel

them to leave....Attendance is not compulsory.... When in school the children are their own bosses. The teachers have no jurisdiction whatever. They are merely there as advisors to the student body. The keynote of the school is freedom.

The Sunday Times, New Brunswick, Dec. 1, 1918

## Red Flag Brings Ferrer School Into the Limelight

Through the...recent visit paid by a party of men from this city and vicinity to the school when they had the red flag flying over the grounds lowered, this school has received no little notoriety of late.

The Socialistic emblem first hit the breeze from the top of a water tank in the rear of one of the Ferrer School buildings....This was the fuse that touched off the pent-up feelings of the surrounding farmers, many of whom boast of ancestry who fought in the Revolutionary War.

The emblems were quite enough to stir the farmers to a Boston Tea Party fever of patriotism, and a troop of horsemen was quickly organized, and with Winchesters, shotguns, blunderbusses, automatics, and a few carrying knives, the riders swooped down on the Socialists just at dusk....The ladies of the place fled to a nearby wood....The bewhiskered men of the colony dropped in their tracks...

At the foot of the water tower, one of the farmers unsheathed a large carving knife and cut the halyards that held the scarlet emblem. As the flag fluttered to the ground, the horsemen cheered wildly and as the Stars and Stripes were run up to the top of the tank they sang 'The Star Spangled Banner."

The horsemen carried the two red flags into New Brunswick and presented them to the Sheriff of Middlesex County....The Sheriff announced that he'd see that no more red flags were aired in Piscataway Township if he had to organize a machine gun battalion to do it.



The JHSCJ is grateful to the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey for a grant supporting the American Jewish Experience Lecture Series.

# "Red Emma" Goldman's Jewish Anarchism

Goldman called for

'everybody's right to

beautiful things.'

Emma Goldman was born in Kovno, Lithuania, in 1869 into a religiously traditional household. As a teenager, she was deeply influenced by the Russian anarchist writers Chernyshevsky and Bakunin. When she expressed a desire for further education, her father told her, "Girls don't have to learn much! All a Jewish daughter needs to know is how to prepare gefilte fish, cut noodles fine and give the man plenty of children." Rebelling against such limits, in 1885 the strong-minded 16-year-old Goldman left home and boarded a boat for America, the land of freedom. By the 1890s, Goldman won a reputation as "Red Emma," perhaps the most notorious radical lecturer in the United States.

Goldman spent a lifetime agitating for universal values such as an end to war, racism, religious differences, and ethnocentrism; for social justice for working people; for the abolition of capitalism; and for freedom of spiritual and intellectual expression—including free love. However, she never forgot her Jewish identity. While she was

still a child, Goldman's family was driven from Kovno to Konigsburg, Germany, and then to St. Petersburg, Russia, by anti-Semitic violence. Her experience of Russian violence against Jews informed her lifelong advocacy for social justice.

When she arrived in America, Goldman settled in Rochester, N.Y., where she worked in the garment industry and married Jacob Kersner. A year later, Goldman was outraged by the hanging of seven political anarchists who were convicted, on flimsy evidence, of planting a bomb in Chicago's Haymarket Square that killed seven police officers. After tolerating near-starvation wages and marital strife, in 1889 Goldman divorced Kersner, packed her sewing machine and personal effects, and moved to New York's Lower East Side in search of greater freedom and a larger platform for her anarchist views.

In New York City, anarchist newspaper editor Johann Most greatly influenced Goldman. Recognizing her charisma, Most encouraged the fiery Goldman to agitate among Yiddish-speaking workers for general strikes and the overthrow of the state. Beyond the usual anarchist protest against economic inequality, Goldman also called for "freedom, the right to self-expression [and] everybody's right to beautiful things." Goldman invoked the love of beauty and higher instincts that, she believed, are shared by all humans regardless of cultural background or economic status.

At this time, Goldman met and became involved with

Alexander Berkman, a fellow anarchist. In 1892, the pair became incensed by the repression and killing of strikers at Carnegie Steel's Homestead plant, near Pittsburgh. Goldman funded Berkman's purchase of the gun with which he wounded Henry Clay Frick, manager of Carnegie Steel, in a failed assassination attempt. Berkman was sentenced to life in prison, and the United States government launched a crackdown on other anarchists. One year later, Goldman was imprisoned for violating laws that prohibited anarchist speech. Goldman proclaimed that the government "can never stop women from talking."

After her release from prison in 1895, Goldman ceased advocating for direct action such as assassination and general strikes and proclaimed instead that "the key to anarchist revolution was a revolution in morality...a conquest of the 'phantoms' that held people captive" such as racism and religious intolerance. In 1919, the U.S. government deported her to Russia. Expecting to find

freedom in the "workers' paradise," Goldman instead found communist repression and lingering anti-Semitism. Disillusioned, Goldman departed and spent her remaining days as a self-described "woman without a country." She lived for a time

in Republican Spain but fled when Franco's fascists triumphed, moving to France. She spoke out against Stalin, Hitler, and all forms of totalitarianism.

In 1906, Goldman wrote optimistically, "Owing to a lack of a country of their own, [Jews] developed, crystallized and idealized their cosmopolitan reasoning faculty...working for the great moment when the earth will become the home for all, without distinction of ancestry or race." After her Soviet experience, however, she wrote: "When I was in America, I did not believe in the Jewish question removed from the whole social question. But since we visited some of the pogrom regions I have come to see that there is a Jewish guestion, especially in the Ukraine.... It is almost certain that the entire Jewish race will be wiped out should many more changes take place." Writing in 1937 after the rise of Hitler, Goldman's Jewish identity found renewed expression: "While I am neither Zionist nor Nationalist, I have worked for the rights of the Jews and [against] every attempt to hinder their life and development."

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# American Jewish Experience Lecture Series 2017

The American Jewish Experience Lecture Series will begin its 20th consecutive year in April. A complete schedule is given below. All lectures are open to the public. A donation of \$2.00 is requested at the door to help defray the cost of the series.

Series #1

Jewish Family Services 52 Concordia Shopping Center (intersection Perrineville and Prospect Plains Rds) Monroe Township

> Lectures are held on the 2nd\* Tuesday of the month (\*Note change due to holiday) 10:00-11:30 a.m.

April 4\* Dr. Nathan Reiss Jews of the Bronx

May 9 Fred Kaimann
How Jews Invented the Internet

June 13 Howard Jacobs

Jews in High Tech in New Jersey

July 11 Stephen Eisdorfer
Terrorism, Immigration Restriction, and the Jews

August 8 Regie Buchsbaum Roth My Grandfather's Legacy

Sept.12 Stephen Eisdorfer
Road of Promise--Kurt Weil Lost and Found

Oct. 3\* Dr. Marcia Midler
Outrageous Sophie Tucker: Cultural Rebel,
Comedienne, "Last of the Red Hot Mamas"

Nov. 14 Sandra Lanman Finding Family, "Dead or Alive"

#### (continued from page 3)

house with all the harvest carvings on the outside. Sam built the house and did the carvings with his own hands. The house is still standing today at the end of School St. Next door was Fred Kotter's, where Fred and Helen grew crops, even on their front lawn, and canned everything. Fred was president of my Dad's painters' union and they'd grown up together.

I was six years old when my parents divorced, and my mother, brother, and I left Stelton for Highland Park. Many other families moved to Highland Park as the Series #2

Highland Park Conservative Temple/ Congregation Anshe Emeth 201 South 3rd Avenue, Highland Park

> Lectures are held on the 3rd\* Wednesday of the month (\*Note change due to holiday) 10:30 a.m. - 12:00 noon

April 26\* Dr. Nathan Reiss Jews of the Bronx

May 17 Fred Kaimann
How Jews Invented the Internet

June 21 Howard Jacobs Jews in High Tech in New Jersey

July 19 Stephen Eisdorfer
Terrorism, Immigration Restriction, and the Jews

August 16 Regie Buchsbaum Roth My Grandfather's Legacy

Sept.27\* Stephen Eisdorfer
Road of Promise--Kurt Weil Lost and Found

Oct. 18 Dr. Marcia Midler
Outrageous Sophie Tucker: Cultural Rebel,
Comedienne, "Last of the Red Hot Mamas"

Nov. 15 Sandra Lanman Finding Family, "Dead or Alive"

Jewish Family Services invites you to join in a glatt kosher lunch immediately following the HP lecture. Please call 732-777-1940 if you would like to stay for lunch.

Stelton population diminished after the close of the school in 1952. But we were always over there as my dad remained in Stelton until he remarried. My grandfather Boris continued living in Stelton for another eight years, in his house with his boarders, until his death in 1966.

Nancy Forman Witham is a registered nurse and a painter who grew up in Highland Park. She now lives in Florida.

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