

The Max Family Story

Alter Max, also known as Mordechai Gershovsky, was Nathan's father. He was born on 6 May 1878 in Svisloch, Belarus. Alter was fatherless at birth and his mother died seven months later so he was taken in by a woman who had been his aunt when her first husband was alive.

He was apprenticed at an early age to a 'schindelmacher', a maker of wooden tiles which covered the timber-built houses of those days. His bed was among the shavings under the bench and much more than his contemporaries he used the 'shtiebel' or little shul, in the village as both a place of worship and a spot to sit down after a day's labour.

Not having had the benefit of a formal education in a cheder for long, he picked up knowledge by ear and trained his memory to retain it. I used to marvel at his ability to go to school between mincha (afternoon prayer) and maariv (evening prayer) and repeat the alternate lines of the psalms which used to be said at those times on the Sabbath.

Having no parents and no papers, in those days an absolute essential, he stood doubly in danger: firstly, from the Russian military authorities because boys in his circumstances became by decree, 'children of the little father', meaning the Tsar of Russia. This meant being drafted in to the army with little chance of getting out before twenty-five years, and secondly from his own people who, given a quota by the government of Jews to serve in the forces from each area, seized on men in his circumstances to fill up the lists.

Alter married Rachel Shineberg. My mother's 'nadan' or dowry, was the few rubles which bought a ticket for my father to travel from Hamburg to Liverpool, as the first step to going to her brothers in New York. So, he 'chapped der grenitz', that is, stole across the border, into Germany, reached Liverpool and eventually sent for my mother. His training in Russia enabled him to master the skills of cabinetmaking very quickly and he obtained work at the Model Cabinet Works in West Derby Street, run by Messer's. Ramm and Israel's for many years. My father in later years often said ruefully that his initial skill was a mixed blessing because those without it turned their hands and energies to dealing and business, becoming well off in later years, and, as I was to hear many times later, "you'll never make money at the bench".

Abraham the eldest son was born in Liverpool on 13 September 1905 and he recalled his father returning to Liverpool in 1908: Standing next to my mother, I watched a man strange to me, helping the driver of a horse cab to lift off from the luggage carrier on the roof steel bound trunk. The man was my father who had left Liverpool some six months previously on the last lap of a journey commenced in 'der heim', as the Russian Pale was known to our immigrant parents. I was three years old at the time and my father had come back to what had been regarded as only an interim stop, defeated by a combination of labour troubles in New York, which meant no chance of employment at his trade and an inability to find a job which did not entail working on the Sabbath.

Alter and Rachel had further children. Chaim (Hyman Simcha) born 1 Nov 1906, Joseph 11 October 1909, Annie 1912 (died 1930 aged 18), Jacob 12 December 1914, Elsie (Esther) 12 January 1917, Toby 1919, Nathan 1924 and Miriam 30 August 1925. Rachel sadly died on 30 September 1928 when Nathan was only four years old. She is buried in Rice Lane Cemetery in Liverpool.

Abraham recalled the family life in Liverpool. We lived in that part of Smithdown Lane near Oxford Street and Bamber Street, opposite substantial houses set back from the road by long gardens and rising terrace-like up the slope of the land in that neighbourhood. I caused my mother much concern by getting lost frequently, the passing herds of sheep going to the abattoir, a common sight in those

days, were an irresistible attraction. On being questioned I invariably gave my name as Bamber Street, the inhabitants of which quickly became accustomed to seeing a small boy being led by the hand of a policeman and directed him to my home nearby. To curb my propensity for wandering away, I was sent to school in Smithdown Lane which, built on a slope, had a boys' playground reached by a long flight of stone steps.



Smithdown Lane 1906

The family shopping was done at Sanderson's, a grocery shop in the middle of Bamber Street. The wife ran the shop while her husband continued in his occupation of a glazier. In those days it was a common sight to see a glazier with a wooden pack on his back containing glass and a can dangling below holding the putty. A daughter of the Sanderson family oversaw the delicatessen section in Coopers of Church Street, where she was to be seen for many years attending to requirements with a smile and seemingly unhurried efficiency.

Another grocery store nearby was in Crown Street, run by the Joseph family and I have a vivid recollection of seeing there sugar in a cone-shaped form like a dunce's hat which was later cut up by using a kind of hand guillotine. This lump sugar was of a close consistency than that of today and in longer and flatter pieces. In those days a samovar was a common sight in Jewish homes and tea was sipped, I'm afraid rather noisily, between lips and teeth holding the piece of sugar. No doubt many will remember the mantel-piece graced by a pair of brightly polished Shabbos candle-sticks and the 'shtaysell', which was the pestle and mortar used to pound the poppy seed for flavouring the 'hamentashen' (triangular filled cookie) baked for Purim, while on the sideboard, and reflected in the mirror back, was the samovar, made of a silvery-coloured metal, while the other two were made of brass.

The family moved to Crown Street with its tall three-storey houses, not Crown Square I must repeat. There was a vast social difference between them. The latter being a sort of court with small houses, long since swept away. We had as neighbours the Latins, who later opened a tailoring shop in Brownlow Hill. Shopping was done at Albert's when the daughters help their mother to serve customers from far and near. The shop was always, it seemed to me, full of good things and people. There was always a kindly word for me from the good lady in charge and often a little delicacy as a gift. The grocery shops of those days were the market centres of the community and the owners a sheet anchor when things were bad. Much help was given by them to families in need, quietly and without strings.

Soon we moved again, to Iden Street and shopping was now in Fairclough Lane. For meat at Goldbergs, later taken over by the son Simon, or at Mrs. Bredski's in Montague Street, groceries at Michaelson's, who later moved to the top of Brownlow Hill, greengroceries at Strofsky's in Crown Street, wine for Shabbos at Cohen's and papers in Yiddish at Kantrowitz.

The Jewish newsagents in the district sold several papers in Yiddish and one went there for religious books and other requirements. Kantrowitz's was especially favoured by my mother because they ran a lending library where for a penny a volume, she took out romances and dramas written in the mother tongue. I remember that my father bought from the same shop a printed sheet containing the Aleph Bet and below it the musical notations for singing the haftara, which was pasted on a board and used in many cheders which abounded in the neighbourhood. I learnt them at home with the script writing in Hebrew from my mother's tuition.

The tepple was an enamel-lined pot tapering towards the mouth and particularly adapted for the cooking of tzimmes or cholent. No self-respecting housewife of those days was without jars of home-pickled herring, home-made raisin wine, mead for Pesach, 'rossel' – a kind of beetroot soup – pickled 'uggkess', a barrel of sauerkraut, 'retach' in salt, beetroot in vinegar, her own baked bread for Shabbos, and of course cake for visitors. I never remember my mother baking kichel, that tasty egg-bound biscuit so beloved in those days.

After the death of Rachel, Alter remarried in 1931 in Liverpool to Rebecca Kalmanovitch. Rebecca was a widowed shopkeeper who lived on Duke Street. The family story is that she agreed to marry Alter Max on the condition that only his two youngest children, Miriam and Nathan, came to live with them and the rest of his children, three brothers and two sisters could not. It is assumed that maybe the eldest brother, Abraham Max and a younger brother, Chaim Max looked after them.

The 1939 Register shows Alter, Rebecca and Miriam living at 173 Duke Street. Rebecca is listed as a shopkeeper; Alter was a cabinet maker and Miriam was at school. Nathan attended school at the Liverpool Institute. Family memories are that Alter's marriage to Rebecca was not the happiest and Alter moved to Glasgow post war to work as a joiner fitting out ships that were being built in the Govan Shipyards. He was killed when he was sixty-nine crossing a road in Glasgow. He was hit by a motor omnibus and suffered a fractured skull.

The family memories are taken from articles written by Nathan's eldest brother Abraham.
Liverpool Jewry: the changing years. Liverpool Jewish Gazette, April 26 1968.

Huge gratitude goes to Jeff Max who supplied the photos, documents and family memories of Nathan and the Max Family.