

GROWING UP IN HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

1908 - 1928



by Morris I. Davidson, C.P.A.

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2025

Dedicated to "Skipper" Jo Davidson

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Cover illustration from the collection of the author.

The Davidson Family, 1911. Standing front row: (left) Joseph H. Davidson, the author's brother (right) Morris I. Davidson (author). Seated, left to right: Yetta "Hinda Etta" Davidson, mother, Jack Davidson, brother, Usher Davidson, father, Max Davidson, brother. Standing rear row: (left) James Chernow, uncle, (right) Rose Chernow, aunt.

Unless otherwise identified, photographs are courtesy of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford

GROWING UP IN HARTFORD by Morris I. Davidson is the first in a series of books detailing the history of Jews in Connecticut, to be published by Andrew Mountain Press.

Andrew Mountain Press
P O Box 14353
Hartford, CT 06114

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Foreward

In my essays, I present the Davidson Family history only as typical of many a Jewish family of my era.

I became interested in writing about our bringing up days in Hartford, Connecticut out of respect and memory of my brother, "Skipper" Jo Davidson, deceased April 3, 1981. His philosophy of "Joy in Living" endeared him to me far beyond brotherly love.

I hereby express my deep appreciation:

To my two sons and their wives, Dr. Alan J. Davidson and Janet, Arnie and Penny Davidson for their kind words and encouragement to continue writing.

To my teacher Ms. Sterpka of the University of Connecticut where I sat in her class in basic writing as an audit student.

To my sister Ida Greenspon for her help in proofreading some of my essays.

To Rabbi Gerald B. Zelermyer of the Emanuel Synagogue for his inspiring letter as shown in the Forward section.

To Sally Ganz, niece of Atty. Harry Schwolsky for history of the Schwolsky Family.

To my brother Jack Davidson for reminiscing with me a bit.

To Marcia Lotstein of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford for her encouragement to write.

To Julie Green for some historical data.

To Judy Gurian for her assistance on Hebrew transliterations.

To Candace Hall, my publisher, for her guidance.

To Alfred Weisel and Daniel Nesson of the Emanuel Synagogue, for various interpretations.

Morris I. Davidson

Morris I. Davidson
December 1987



EMANUEL SYNAGOGUE

GERALD B. ZELERMYER
Rabbi

November 9, 1987
17 Heshvan, 5748

Mr. Morris Davidson
7 Pelham Road
West Hartford, CT 06107

Dear Morris:

Your literary pieces are always a pleasure to read. Not only, as in "My Religion", are they a supply of interesting data about Hartford Jewry. They are also an insight into a personality I encounter frequently at SHUL.

This one was like the HALLAH bread you describe... just delectable!

Thanks for sharing your reflections.

Sincerely,

Gerald B. Zelermeyer
Rabbi

Our Heritage

One would ask, what was our Jewish training in our family? I can answer, strict and compelling, and on looking back, one of the most memorable episodes of our lives.

Jewish training for us at ages ten to twelve meant going to grade school classes from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and then during the dark winter months, attending the old Talmud Torah on Pleasant Street with such venerable teachers as Rosenblatt, Gurian, Simons, Stein, Samson, Neiditz and Kohn. The latter was the father of Samuel C. Kohn, attorney. How the children played their childish pranks on him! "Lugtch" (nickname for tall in Yiddish) Ellovich would come into the classroom on roller skates and rouse the fury and wrath of poor Rabbi Kohn. As it was, the rabbi was a bit eccentric. He would clean his derby hat with saliva, rubbing it with his coat sleeve. We still have good memories of him as a teacher. Incidentally, tall prankster Meyer Ellovich subsequently became a basketball star at Weaver High School.

We always welcomed the High Holidays, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover. My mother treated us with special culinary dishes on Shavuoth, Hanukkah, and Purim. I will never forget these, nor the gaiety at the synagogues on Simchas Torah. High Holidays meant meeting our Jewish friends of the community, especially female acquaintances. We dressed in our best, for credit merchants always reaped the harvest during our Jewish holidays. They were commission men who encouraged purchasing at G. Fox and Company, so we were always dressed up, even though it took my dad the rest of the year to pay for them.

Recollections of the Hartford Hebrew School on Pleasant

Street include Purim plays, outings, visits to the State Library, Friday night and Saturday services, and are a blessing in our memories.

We did have a good Jewish training, and we are grateful for it. G-d bless my mother for her inspiration for education and my dad for his labor to pay for it.

The above pertains to my generation, the third in the Davidson family, and illustrates a wonderful concept in the Jewish religion, the handing down of the enthusiasm and fervor for learning Torah and its precepts, from generation to generation.

My Uncle Jimmy Chernow, my mother's brother, related the following story which illustrates how study was pursued and perhaps imbued my mother toward the concept of learning.

At five years of age, Jimmy went to both the cheder (Hebrew school) and a Russian grade school. Later a melamed (teacher) came to their home in Belayizerkow, Russia, which they owned, and he studied Gemorah, Jewish, Hebrew and Russian. Girls did not go to cheder, but my mother, through a melamed, also learned Yiddish and Russian. Jimmy related how he walked with a little lamp on his coat to avoid accidents on his way to cheder, all for getting a Jewish education. How my mother would caution him not to cross the Russ River, which emptied into the Dnieper River near their home. The rivers would freeze in winter and thaw out in warmer weather. My mother always cautioned Jimmy about crossing on thin ice.

The above example illustrates continuity in Jewish studies. I am grateful and pleased to know my ancestry imbedded a spirit of constant study and learning and exemplified itself in our present generation. My brother "Skipper" Davidson, of pleasant memory, was a professor

at Brooklyn College, dramatic and speech pursuits. I became a C.P.A. in the State of Connecticut. My sister Ida taught at the Bracket School in the City of Hartford. My brother Max, of blessed memory, was a pharmacist. My brother Jack attended the University of Connecticut.

I attribute this urge for learning to our Jewish heritage.

From the author's collection:

Left to right:

Aunt Tilly, Grandpa David Chernow, Mendel's wife and two children, Mendel, Grandma Marian Chave Chernow. Taken in Kiev, 1912.



Family Life

One could ask, was there a close and happy family relationship between our immediate family? I can say an emphatic "Yes!"

My parents and my brother Joe migrated to Austria, Poland, in 1906, and remained there until 1908. They had escaped the tyranny and atrocities of Czar Nicholas who reigned from 1880 to the year of the Russian Revolution in 1917. My mother spoke of crossing the "granitz" (the border) to Austria, where they settled in a town called Brody. I was born there on August 20, 1906 and my dad alone migrated further to the United States in 1908, and then arranged for my mother and the two boys to join him. We settled at 1 Orchard Street in Hartford, where my brothers Jack and Max and my sister Ida were born.

I observed closely my dad's fervor for prayer, and devotion to the Jewish religion. He would envelop himself in his large prayer shawl and place his phylacteries (two small square leather boxes containing slips inscribed with scriptural passages) on his arm and forehead each weekday morning. It was a stimulating ritual for him and helped him endure a workday stretching from early morning to late night.

I remember my mother for her tireless effort in the preparation of the Sabbath. Her challahs (Sabbath bread) would be kneaded, placed in pans, and thanks to the good graces of the Baggish Bakery, allowed to be baked in their ovens in the summer time. My sister Ida would tag along to the bakery, gloating and gleaming at our mother's ability, especially to twist and braid long strips of dough into beautiful twisted challies. My mother had apparently learned all this from her mother, in her old

country Russia.

In the winter time, with the old black stove shined and polished for Sabbath, my mother would start baking challies at home. She would always think of her children, making five small challies in descending sizes, the biggest for the eldest and smallest for the youngest child. Her love for her children was always displayed in her cooking. Egg yolks from a fat hen purchased for the Sabbath were cooked and served to each child according to age. My mother's "petza," a jellied ingredient from calves' hooves, spiced with garlic and pepper, was an occasional treat. She would quickly roll and cut dough in thin slices, with a sharp knife making lukshen (noodles) for her Sabbath soups.

My dad awoke each morning before any of the other members of the household, and would perform certain functions for the family. He would grate and sift the ashes from the stove, bring up a pail of coal from the cellar, to start a fresh fire to warm the house, and also never failed to squeeze several oranges for juice for his wife and children.

My mother would insist that we eat her culinary dishes, almost in one sitting. She wasn't happy unless she served several dishes with the admonition "Es, es, es!" (eat, eat, eat!) I recall her delectable pierogies (dough filled with cherries or potatoes), blintzes (thin dough filled with cheese or blueberries), kreplach (a thin dough filled with chicken liver or mashed potatoes, then browned), verrinikes (cut up slices of thin dough mixed with kerachina groiten, groats), kugel (pudding made with potatoes or rice and raisins). What memories of her fine cooking, especially her chopped meat loaf rolled with baked egg!

I pleasantly recall both my mother and dad preparing, soon after the summer in the early fall, food for the winter.

This involved pickling tomatoes and cucumbers and making borscht (beet soup) for the Jewish holidays. They also filled crocks of chopped cabbage which were left on the porch for winter freezing. The result was sauerkraut, another delicacy.

My dad, during the grape season of September and October, would bring home baskets of juicy California grapes for wine making. Gallon jugs were filled with grapes and allowed to ferment for a period of time. My dad would hasten the process by pouring whiskey into the jugs at the outset. Vishnik, a special drink made principally with cherries, was a favorite sweet treat that he would love to prepare for the family.

I include in our happy family occasions our Bar Mitzvas, for which my mother showed no partiality among the four boys. Each had his due: to be called to recite the blessing over the Torah for the first time and to do the reading of the Haftorah. We had prepared for the day at the old Talmud Torah on Pleasant Street.

The days before the Saturday of our Bar Mitzva meant buying new shoes at Goldberg's shoe store on Windsor Street. They were the family of Barney Goldberg of Barney's Used Furniture. We always looked forward to going there, for they gave free pencil boxes for school. The Goldberg sisters particularly were very kind.

During the week of the Bar Mitzva we would fill grab bags with goodies, silver top candies, cookies, an apple, an orange for the children attending the Sabbath services on our Bar Mitzva day.

The elders of that day graciously extended mazel tov on the special Sabbath marking the reaching of manhood. Venerable persons included the Finkelsteins, Antiput, Levy, Nirenstein, and Levine who attended Saturday services at the Talmud Torah regularly, and they were the

main benefactors.

Of all the happy memories, the most outstanding is our family "Mispocha," attending my party in our home the evening of my Bar Mitzva. I was the recipient of numerous and wonderful gifts, including three fountain pens, an ornate desk set, cameras and books.

I speak of the "Mispocha" but in reality they were the "lontzleit," friends from the old country Russia where a strong friendship developed from their trials and tribulations. They shared these with love and helpfulness, in situations such as the birth of a child or the loss of parents, and they shared also in whatever joys they had.

Music was a part of our family's life. When Saturday night came and my dad's fruit business was generally good, he would come home with a record for our enjoyment. Our phonograph had an immense oversized speaker, one as depicted by RCA Victor with a dog listening. The machine served the purpose in our family and I have fond recollections of many arias. My sister Ida and brothers Max and Jack started piano lessons at the Hartt School, my brother Joe studied the violin, and I played the trumpet.

I recall the memory of my ever smiling dad, who everyone referred to as "Usher" with "the white horse." At one time he also owned a black horse that ran away at night, and the policeman would come knocking at our door. My father would entice the horse back to the stable, using a salted stone, which was part of a delicacy for a horse.

My dad dispersed his wares, fruits and vegetables, in the north section of Hartford. Wherever I go, either the Hebrew Home and Hospital, the Federation Square at Bishop's Corner, the Regents, a senior men's club in West Hartford, or at professional meetings of the Connecticut Society of Certified Public Accountants, certain individuals

in these organizations will reminisce with me about Usher with the white horse.

From the author's collection:
Usher's white horse



Childhood Joys

One could ask, what childhood joys did I experience during the years of growing up? I can answer, "Many."

It may be surprising, but I recollect playing with bean bags tossing them into a slanting board with a large opening. How earnestly I tried to score a hit! I also played with dolls. Although I instinctively shunned the pastime, I felt it was a girl's activity. How I also looked forward to the free milk and crackers in my kindergarten days at the Henry Barnard School on Atlantic Street.

In later years I recall the game of "Ring O Levio" or "Hide and Seek." In our neighborhood, the boys would form a group and then suddenly scatter. A leader, one of the boys remaining, went searching for us. Approaching a place where one of the boys hid, the leader would shout, "Come Out, Wherever You Are!"

In contrast, I recall the girls playing "Hopscotch" and "Jacks." In the latter game, the girls would throw jacks, small metal objects, in a manner so that they would scatter wide and apart from each other. This was purposely done as the object of the game was to pick up one jack at each bounce of the ball without touching another jack. At the second bounce, the girl had to pick up two jacks. If she should touch another jack accidentally, she was disqualified, and so the game progressed. It was fun watching, and even though it was a girl's game, there seemed to be much skill involved.

Especially joyful was the Passover holiday. My mother would give us English and American walnuts. Little did she know that we would soon relinquish a good deal of her supply to other Jewish boys in the neighborhood. We would play marbles with the American walnuts, and a

large English walnut was placed in a circle, the target of our effort to hit, with the smaller American nuts. The lucky person hitting the English walnut would "take all."

I remember playing with my neighborhood boy friends "Buck, Buck, How Many Fingers Up?" The game was sometimes called "Pony." The boys would form a long line and bend their backs. An appointed boy would run and jump onto our backs. He would raise a number of fingers and declare, "Buck, Buck, How Many Fingers Up?"

In the winter time, we formed double-rippers. The rope of one sled was hitched onto another sled, and went sliding from the top of the hill, Goodman Place, down Orchard onto Windsor Street. There were three or four boys on each ride. I recall one instance in a heavy snowstorm, of being rescued after having fallen from my porch in a heavy snow.

It must be remembered that we had no cars nor school buses to take us to our Hartford High School located at Broad and Farmington Avenue. Walking to school was good as it gave us an opportunity to meet with boys who lived nearby; namely, Pleasant and Winthrop Streets. The friendships that grew therefrom became a joyful part of our lives.

Childhood games are so universal and full of joy, played all over the world by children in their own satisfying manner. In the 1920's we were content to generate games as mentioned: Bean Bag Tossing, Hide and Seek, Hopscotch, Jacks, Nibs, Pony, Sled Sliding, and Hiking. I recall one other game called Odd and Even, with two children playing with one hand behind their backs and quickly bringing the arm forward reflecting either one, two, and up to five fingers. The opponent went through the same motions, and if he had announced an even count, wins the game. If an odd number of fingers were shown, he pays a due penalty.

Vying to win baseball cards was another game. This was done with two boys by tossing a baseball card against a wall. The boy tossing the card that landed closest to the wall would collect both cards, and the game continued on. Or a variation of trying to win baseball cards was to toss cards up into the air. The one boy who had elected that the cards would fall face up would collect both cards and be ahead.

Pitching pennies against a wall was also popular, the nearest penny to the wall would be the winner of all pennies pitched.

Popular among boys was pitching the large blade of a jack knife. The knife would be thrown into the air and would be measured with your fingers how far it had stuck into the soft ground. The one requiring less fingers to measure would be the winner.

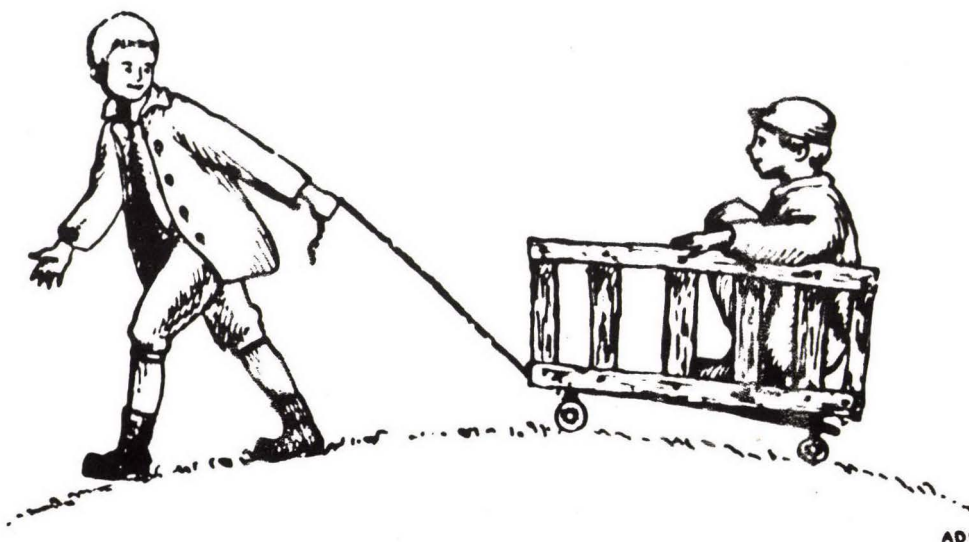
How I recall many pleasant days playing with friends at Riverside Park, bordering the Connecticut River on the east side of Hartford, and the season's games of baseball, softball and football. Recently, while reminiscing with Max Missan, a well-known local guitarist, he recalled skating on Skinner's Pond at Riverside Park. We also recollected accompanying our parents and emptying our pockets into the Pond, observing the custom called Tashlich.

Also popular in the 1920's was a game called Piggy Stick. An old long broom stick was cut, one piece perhaps two feet long. Another small piece, perhaps no longer than four inches, sharpened to a point at one end with a knife. The latter piece would be placed on the ground and become the piggy. The longer stick would be used to hit the piggy into the field where another boy playing would try to catch. If unsuccessful, he had another chance by tossing the piggy toward the long stick. If he was lucky, the piggy would hit the stick placed on the ground by his

contender, and it would be his turn at bat.

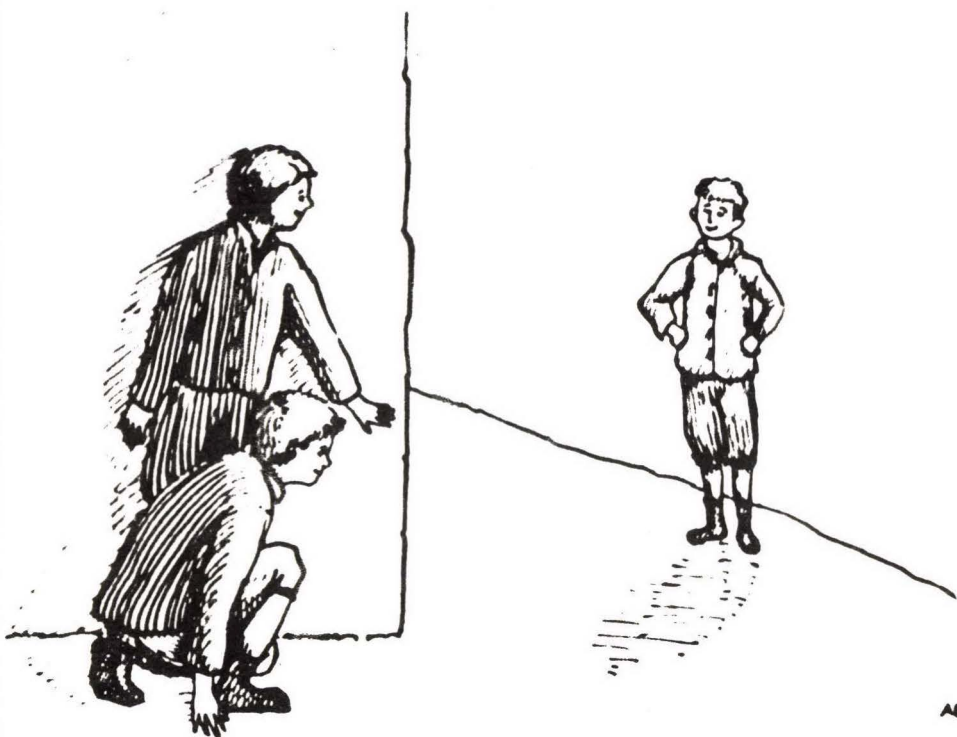
Ingenuity prevailed. We would nail a pair of old skates to a board approximately two feet in length, somehow establish an upright handle, and became a scooter. A wooden orange box would be attached to axles and wheels from a discarded baby carriage, to form a wagon to go riding on, or to get ice for our kitchen ice-box.

Not far from our home at 79 Portland Street was a place referred to as Daniel's Mill. It had a large playing area, and so it was our popular place to play baseball. Its name originated from the fact that on location was this large building for storing flour, and the building had many, many windows. One day while I was at bat, my hit went for one of the window panes, and sure enough, there was a splattering of glass! I ran home, and later a policeman came knocking at the door looking for me. My father, after receiving the complaint, went for me hiding under one of the beds. All in the life of growing up!





AD 86



AD 84



left to right: Joseph Davidson, Morris Davidson

More Memories of Family Life

On one winter Friday afternoon, my mother opened the door of her black stove, to inspect the progress of her challahs (Sabbath bread) and a gust of hot air burst out and singed her face almost beyond recognition. How stalwart a person to endure the happening. She braced herself and went on with the preparation for the Sabbath.

How happy my mother was when one Thanksgiving I surprised her with a large new roasting pan to prepare her holiday turkey.

I recall the happiness of the family when my brother Joe, having completed college and working in New York, surprised the family one morning with a complete dining room set. It was beautiful and of sturdy construction, shipped from Macy's Department Store in New York.

What joy I received at the happiness my mother displayed when I treated her to a performance of a Russian Ballet at the then new Bushnell Memorial Hall in 1930.

Jewish birthday dates caused a great deal of confusion to the children. Jewish mothers referred to their childrens' birthdays in relation to the Jewish calendar, as occurring either on the first day of Rosh Hashanah or the second day of Passover, or two days before Yom Kippur. Inasmuch as the Jewish holidays fell on different calendar days each year, the children had more than one birthday to remember. I tried to settle the confusion for myself by adopting the first day of school as my birthday and used September 4th as my date of birth. My confusion was finally resolved when my mother presented me with my official Austrian birth certificate, which noted August 20, 1906 as my date of birth.

The Hebrew calendar consists of twelve months of twenty-eight days, and a thirteen month year occurring every four years, with that thirteenth month known as Adar II. It is well understood how Jewish mothers following the Hebrew calendar would result in many different Gregorian birthdays for their children.

How proud I was of my mother the day she became a citizen of the United States. My dad was too engrossed in long hours of work necessary to support his family to be able to study or attend evening school to become a citizen. My brother Joe and I also took our oath of allegiance to the United States and became naturalized citizens.

Was my mother less prudent in not allowing her children to engage in every activity of our day? Sometimes I feel that whatever her discretion was, we should have enjoyed going to Camp Courant. Boys and girls eleven to twelve years of age would gather at Keney Tower Square at Ely and Main Streets, and board open-air trolleys and spend the day swimming at Camp Courant. In another activity during the summertime, popular among many families including the Freedmans, Zimmermans, Meranskies, Shapiros and Arensons, their boys would be off to the Good Will Club Camp at Marlborough, Connecticut. It was sponsored by David and Mary Hall at their summer home in Marlborough. None of the Davidson boys attended.

Whatever my mother's discretion in the above, she was liberal in many other ways, permitting us to enjoy outdoor games, urging us to make friendships and connections with persons and places of honor and reputation, including the Junior Y.M.H.A., swimming at the Y.M.C.A., Zionist Clubs, Hartt School of Music, and social groups. How well I remember, though I'm sure she could ill afford it, my mother would slip me some money to help towards belonging to the Upsilon Lambda Phi, a boy's fraternity, when I became a freshman in high school. I made many

good friends therein, and pleasantly recall dances run jointly by Iota Phi and Phi Delta, girls' sororities, and the Ulps.

Somehow, rather than being less prudent, my mother was most intelligent and foresaw the value to have pleasant childhood memories, and fostered play with children of many backgrounds in our closely knit area.

We learned of many facets of life from actual happenings in the neighborhood and from the families we grew to know. These included sudden and unexpected separation or disappearance of a husband from a closely knit and loving family; sudden death of a young son due to a ruptured appendix; the imprisonment of a head of a family who was found guilty of bootlegging during Prohibition and how his devoted wife brought him chicken soup (Jewish penicillin), each Friday afternoon during his regretful and depressed stay in prison.

There were gossips circulated of illicit love affairs and unsavory reputations; death of a devoted father, with preservation of the body at home with ice packs since funeral parlors did not exist; teenage get-together parties in the homes of friendly neighbors; Italian funeral dirges played by a band marching slowly on Portland Street; children enjoying high water levels with makeshift boats when the Connecticut river flooded the East Side streets.

There were evidences of disabilities in life, a mentally disturbed mother constantly muttering; a hunchback girl, with the ability to crochet beautiful patterns of lace work; a crippled boy, staggering along as best as he could, a few steps at a time; drownings of adventurous boys in the fast currents of the Connecticut River; loss of lives of boys in the neighborhood when hitchhiking on the treacherous New London turnpike; beautiful memories of school proms, girls dressed in their best and boys dressed in their first tuxedos and high stove hats; homecomings of

college students to their parents; tassels and fringes on buggies on a sunny Sunday morning, the horse cleaned and harness shined, and the exceptional owner peddler and his family going to a picnic to Riverside Park or to Colt's Park on Wethersfield Avenue.

There was awe when a neighboring peddler exchanged his horse for a motor vehicle truck, a rarity, to peddle his fruits and vegetables in nearby towns, to help send children to the only Hartford college, Trinity; to witness murders, and to see blood flowing when a fracas occurred across the street from our dwelling, at a ragshop converted to a dance hall for Saturday night dances; tuberculosis ravaged in the 1920's and young lovable tender lives were blotted out; shadchen marriages, through marriage brokers, prevailed arranging for couples to marry, some subsequently fruitful and some mightily poorly matched and better suitors foregone; scandal from least expected religious entrepreneurs; unexpected talent of a neighbor taking part in Jewish plays then prevalent at the Labor Lyceum on North Main Street, and parts in Jewish plays at the Liberty Theatre opposite Pleasant Street on Main Street, and at the Parsons Theatre on Central Row; and musical ensembles on evenings and weekends of young aspiring musicians.

Really, life was absorbed in a short period of time and in a small area surrounding our home during our growing up years at 79 Portland Street in Hartford, Connecticut.

My Religion

My faith in the Jewish religion has been an integral part of my life from the day of my Bar Mitzva in August 1919, and prior thereto, with the Friday night Junior services at the old Talmud Torah on Pleasant Street. The pleasant bringing up in our home, with the Sabbath cloth, the kiddush, a bracha over a bit of challah taken from a braided Sabbath bread that had been graciously baked by my mother for Shabbas. I remember observing my dad praying daily with his tfillin and tallis, before pursuing his day's labor. The preceding are but a few practices that ingrained my love of the Jewish tradition.

My Bar Mitzva affected my life, inculcating a sense of confidence in myself; the ability to have been able to recite the blessing before and after the reading of the parasha of the week, Shofetim, followed by Haftarah, Isaiah 51:12 - 52:12, in front of many of my friends and mispocha and congregants. I cherish the many kind thoughts of my rabbi for preparing me for the Bar Mitzva and I am grateful to my parents for providing for my cheder days. This sense of assertiveness to my faith, helped me in later years as an advocate for clients in the practice of accounting and in my years of service to the Federal and State governments.

What a wonderful feeling also to experience later in life, the strength and breadth afforded to me by being Jewish. To be able in my travels, New York, Colorado, Arizona, Canada, Israel, to attend a synagogue on the occasion of yahrzeit, or to observe yizkor.

In my teenage and adult years, the philosophical teachings of my Jewish faith carried me through some trying periods, specifically passages from "Pirkai Avoth, Ethics of the Fathers." The sayings therefrom helped me

to restore my faith and courage to meet the vicissitudes of life, the sayings from the Mishnah, the Tractate Avoth, Chapter 1, as an example:

Mishna 1

"Be deliberate in Judgement"

"Raise up many disciples"

"Make a Fence round the Law"

Mishna 2

"Upon three things is the world based: upon the Law, upon (Divine) service, and upon the practice of charity"

Mishna 3

"Be not like servants that minister to the master on the condition of receiving a reward, but be like servants that minister to the master without the condition of receiving a reward; and let the fear of heaven be upon you"

Mishna 4

"Let thy house be a meeting-house for the wise and sit amidst the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst"

I grew to appreciate the stimulation that came from the extensive works of the Talmud, which professed so many sayings on every branch of life; education, sex, weights and measures, effect of associations, fulfilled desires, etc., etc. What a wonderful store of knowledge is contained in the Talmud, which is comprised of the Mishna and Gemorah, which influenced me so immensely and stimulated me to further study of the Torah.

Although my early religious training was Orthodox, wherein praying was dominant, the coming of the Conservative movement, with English translations, study and lectures with famous writers, as observed at the Emanuel Synagogue, principally during the rabbinate of Rabbi Morris Silverman and Rabbi Simon Noveck,

classes in Hebrew Conversation with Alfred Weisel and Mrs. Belle Ger were all experiences of my education.

Junior Y.M.H.A.

Talmud Torah Building,
Pleasant Street, Hartford, CT 1922

Identified: Left to right:

Standing: Daniel Melrose, Advisor, Joseph Soifer, Stephen Katzman, David Schiffer, Morris Aronofsky, Hurwitz, Morris Beizer, Samuel Berman, Solomon Ginewsky, Philip Klein, David Tulin, Myron Kassner.

Sitting: Abe Kassoff, Julian Gross, Morris Davidson, Henry Sobol, John Rottner, Alex Fox



Early Settlers in Hartford, Connecticut (1908 to 1924)

One must realize that there were highly concentrated areas in Hartford, where oppressed Jewish immigrants settled, primarily seeking a haven from the cruelty of Czar Nicholas of Russia.

I remember as a child Windsor Street that ran through a gamut of streets starting from Main Street near Morgan. Windsor Street stretched past Avon Street, close to a series of railroad tracks where the Barnum and Bailey Circus unloaded their menagerie of animals, and near the old P. Berry & Sons Food Warehouse. It continued on past Suffield Street where the Koretza Synagogue was located. Many side street houses became the homes of Jewish immigrant families: Pequot Street, North Street; in the downtown area there were Morgan, Front, Kilbourne, Ferry, Temple and Charles Streets; the Connecticut Boulevard area where farmers brought their vegetables and fruits for the peddlers to buy; Pleasant, Market and Village Streets; and further north again, Winthrop, Canton, Donald, Ely, Russell, Kennedy, Elmer, Belden, Pliney, Florence, Seyms, East, Mather, Bellevue and Wooster Streets.

Wooster Street was the domicile of many ultra-orthodox Jewish families. I readily remember the Schwolsky family lived there, a large family, as was typical of the Jewish families that had emigrated to the United States. Their family consisted of six sons; Jacob, Meyer, Harry, George, Irving and Sam, and three daughters, Mary, Ruth and Helen. I remember the younger girls, Ruth and Helen, as students attending Hartford High School with me, the only high school then existing in Hartford. I mention the Schwolsky family as their father was such a venerable and outstanding individual in my memory, elegant in his

stature, and he had a beautifully trimmed mustache. He wore a yarmulka (skull cap) it seemed at all appearances. He had two titles, "shocet" and "mohel." His ability in organizing choirs and knowledge of cantorial music outranked his religious austerity. Moshe Paranov of the Hartt School of Music was a member of his boys' choir, singing at the Ados Israel on Market Street. How proud the father Reverend Louis Schwolsky must have been of his sons, four attorneys-at-law.

Coincidentally, I recall the Memorial and Armistice Day parades marching by the reviewing stand that had been erected opposite the Keney Tower at Ely and Main Streets. How proud I was of our Jewish representation in the parade, in the person of Harry Schwolsky, who had achieved the rank of Brigadier-General and commanded the 169th Regiment of the 43rd Division of the National Guard of Hartford, when they were called to duty in the war with Germany, Italy and Japan, in both World Wars I and II. Also in the parade was Dr. Benjamin Luntz, Lieutenant Colonel, and I was proud of him.

I recall the days when my brothers and I were called upon at various times to assist my dad in selling his fruit and vegetable products on streets in Hartford. Particularly outstanding were the days on Windsor and Front streets. It was customary for all peddlers to line up their push-carts or horse-drawn vehicles along the curbs of Windsor Street, one next to another for several blocks. On Front Street, on both sides of the street, they intermingled with Italian vendors selling their food supplies. These two streets were central shopping areas, and people came from many areas in the city to buy. Saturday night meant staying up to midnight assisting my dad. It seemed customary for peddlers to dispense their wares, in the early morning of each day on Windsor Street, then adjourn for evening business to Front Street. Saturday night was the "topper" for sales activity.

The two streets were lined with merchants for all types of necessities, and were natural locations to peddle fresh fruits and vegetables. On Windsor Street, there was Nathan Baggish's Bakery to buy bread, rolls, bagels and delectable pastries, especially pies. Groceries could be bought at Rosenblatt's, Max and Tillie. Max was called "Motell," his forename in Jewish.

Also in the grocery business on Windsor Street was my Uncle Pollack, brother to my grandmother. How happy he was to have emigrated from Russia. His wife was always at his side helping him in his store, also assisted by two of their children, Mildred and David. My Uncle Pollack was so happy and engrossed in being in this country that in his initial effort he somehow landed in Iowa, a long way from his destined home in Hartford!

Other businesses on Windsor Street included the fish markets and delicatessens, namely Weinbaums Delicatessen, Gold's Dairy, Goldfarb and Schwartz Fish Markets, Eddies and Goldenberg's Pharmacies; used furniture stores on nearby Pleasant Street, Bergman's and Novick's. There was Robbin's Delicatessen, with "Speedy" Cohen hustling about with a cheerful countenance. Also, on his vehicle, was Mr. Koretsky, selling fish and vegetables. He was the father of Arthur Koret, cantor of the Emanuel Synagogue.

Located on Windsor Street was the Pallotti Andretta Bank. It went bankrupt in the crash of 1929, and immigrants' life savings were lost. What a tragedy to the hard-working people, but somehow they overcame. The Pallotti Bank administrators had been kind to peddlers particularly, helping them to finance the purchase of a new horse or wagon.

I recollect Front Street business stores that drew the buying public to the area, and Front Street became good for the fruit and vegetable business of my father and other

vendors. I recall Jacob and Joseph Blumenthal's Ladies Wear Stores. Nearby was Soifer's Second Hand Store, the owner, father of Joseph Soifer, local public school teacher of music and a pianist. I recall the many many Italian food stores situated closely, one after another, and the chicken markets.

There were Libman's Ladies Wear and Raymond's (Neiman's) Clothing Stores, the latter formerly Avseev's. Joe Bazilian's store of the Park Road, West Hartford's Bazilians, the clothing stores of the Antiput's, and Finkelstein Family. There were Rozinsky's Pawn Shop, the Freedman and Yush Shoe Stores, Hurwitz and Greenberg & Beatman Furniture Stores, also Feinberg Furniture, Hurwitz Men's Shop, Goodfit Uniforms, Prant's Second-Hand Store, the owner, father of Joe Prant, active in the S.E.S. Social Club of the Hartford Jewish Community Center.

I recall Goldberg's Second-Hand Store, Kaplan's Tailor Shop on nearby Temple Street, the HersHKovitz Grocery Store on Temple Street, the owner, father of Charlie HersHKovitz, a tobacco dealer. There were Wynn's Pharmacy, Willen's Hardware, and Yale Hardware, owned by Charlie and Yale Rose, who both sang with me as choir boys led by Mr. Freedman. He had a wholesale candy business and was a part-time cantor (hazzan) and we sang at a hired hall on Sheldon Street during the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur.

It is true that street names in themselves are monotonous to read, but I felt a sense of nostalgia might arise to any readers who lived in those neighborhoods of immigrant settlers in the early 1920's.

Unwarrantable Prejudices

A question is always asked, "What has been your religious experience growing up in Hartford as a Jew, in a social society of many faiths?" I can answer, "I've always been very proud to be a Jew." When there was evidence of intolerances, the question in my mind was "Why?"

During the High Holy Days, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, back in the early days (1914-1917), religious services were conducted in the Hartford Hebrew School, the old Talmud Torah Building on Pleasant Street. Worshipers congregating in front of the building during a brief period of recess from worship were suddenly pelted by the non-Jewish children with stones thrown from the playground of the Henry Barnard School directly opposite. A Jewish boy's eye lid was cut, and I recall summoning Dr. Samuel Katzman and rushing the boy to his office. I recall the flesh being sewn, and I shuddered, and at the moment I asked of myself "Why?" It wasn't an innocent childish prank, but a deliberate episode of hate. Was it generated to the non-Jewish children by their parents or by religious teaching? If the latter, I must say, in my faith, I always identified a commanding respect for the religious conviction of others. I feel that other faiths teaching otherwise are wrong.

In these days in Hartford, I recall the practice of quotas applicable to Jewish boys. "Why?" I had applied to the Hartford Y.M.C.A. for membership. All through my lifetime physical exercise, particularly swimming, was required for my well being. The Y.M.C.A. was the only facility with a swimming pool and gym classes for physical exercises. In applying for membership I was told to overcome a restriction, a special recommendation would be helpful. I turned to a Christian benefactor for this recommendation. This kindness greatly offset the one bad practice of quotas

that then existed, and I know at this date, has been eliminated by the Y.M.C.A.

I recall an occurrence in my Hartford High School years (1920 - 1924) when a prominent student, a member of the track team, suddenly presented himself in front of the session room and called me, without any provocation, "You dirty Jew." "Why?" I was infuriated and struggled with him. Again, was his religious training in error, leading to bigotry and anti-Semitic behavior? Vice Principal Holden punished us by extending our lunch hour to a later session period. I recall his subsequent private talk with me when he assured me that my reaction was natural, but to avoid aggressive response. Since that day, intolerant remarks in many instances had to be overlooked, especially in my travels as an auditor, where company officials did not know my nationality as I looked more Italian than Jewish. Offhand remarks about Jews always irked me, but I kept my nerve.

In my college years (1924-1928), there were evidences of anti-Semitic practices, and again one would ask "Why?" My roommate Sam Rosenblatt applied for a job through an agency, and they advised him to register as Sam Rollins as the latter name did not have a Jewish flavor. He landed a much-needed job. Inadvertently when Meyer Gillespie or I, his roommates, would have occasion to telephone and ask for Sam Rosenblatt, embarrassment set in for Sam. The following fall returning to New York University Evening School of Commerce he was rehired by the same firm, not as Sam Rollins but as Sam Rosenblatt. He had proven his worth to his employers. Sam had a photographic mind and could read a book, just before an exam, and come out with an A in the subject. He made Delta Mu Delta, the Honor Society at New York University, and subsequently became a partner with the C.P.A. firm of Meyerson and Levine, specialists in the difficult field of illegal bankruptcies. It takes perseverance, honor and scholarship to overcome the ever-present

instance of anti-Semitic incidents.

Although there were many instances, as above, of unwarrantable prejudices, I must relate experiences of a brighter outlook with non-Jewish friends and relationships that offset personalities that have prejudicial tendencies. I value my high school co-workers (1924), when I served on the Business Board of the Hartford Public High School class book, meeting wonderful people of a faith other than mine.

In the business world after graduating from New York University's School of Commerce, Accounts and Finance, I engaged in the public practice of Accounting in Hartford. The years 1929 to 1944 embraced depression years and I was grateful to non-Jewish clients for economic support during trying days, and I was appreciative of benefits received and grateful for nonviolent nor anti-Semitic experiences.

In closing, I pay tribute to our scriptures, particularly the "Ethics of The Fathers" that guided me through many difficult times, especially during my four years of college at New York University. A saying therefrom that could be applicable to indiscriminate remarks: "Utter not aught that can not be (straightway) understood, (on the assumption) that it will eventually be understood." Anti-Semitic remarks and practices, I'm sure most people would conclude, are mere ignorance and should not be uttered or practiced.

The "Golden Rule in Judaism" - "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Leviticus xix, 18), is also applicable. The world at large is unaware, it seems at times, that this comprehensive maxim of morality should remain the golden rule of human conduct.

I wish to emphasize that we as children did not feel the animosity or prejudice, as mentioned above, when we

were young. We played with boys and girls of all faiths, and were aware of adults who came from varied nationalities: Italian, Irish, Swedish, German. No thought of hate was evident, when we lived at 1 Orchid Street and 79 Portland Street, 1908-1917. I remember Anna, a Polish immigrant, who came every week to help my mother domestically with the housework. She was considered part of our family. Our laundry man Charlie, of Swedish descent, was always chiding us, but in a pleasant manner. Our so-called "Shabbas helper" Tony, from an Italian family of many children, likeable, and always ready to defend you against an aggressive bully. He came regularly on Saturdays to light our kitchen range, so that mother could feed us hot chicken soup and other hot food on Shabbas. I have a pleasant memory of a nearby neighbor of German descent, a seamstress, who ironed our shirts. A Chinese laundry nearby cleaned my dad's stiff collars for his collarless shirts. A friendly farmer, Mr. Smith, brought us eggs each week from Hebron. They were all United States folks working for a living and accommodating Jew or Gentile in many ways. It was disappointing to experience instances of discrimination in the 1920's. I strongly feel in the isolated cases I cited, that it was due to a lack of a proper attitude and instruction by parents when their children were very, very young.

Zionism

In reminiscing about childhood days in Hartford, 1912-1917, the enthusiasm for Zionism on the part of the elders seems to stand out very vividly. I can recall one person, the late Moses J. Neiditz, a well-known Jewish community leader. "Moe," as he was called, was our peer and served as our advisor in a Zionist club for youngsters and teenagers called "Guards of the White and Blue."

I recall the banners and the pins with the Mogen Dovid (Star of David) displayed, and it gave me such pride in our heritage. I was secretary in the club, and it was nice to write up the minutes of the meeting and to record those attending. I. Oscar Levine, now a prominent attorney in Hartford, was treasurer. Pete Levenson, present day pharmacist in Hartford, recalled the beehive of activity at the Hebrew Institute Building on Pleasant Street, directly across from the Talmud Torah building, and bordering on the corner of Winthrop and Pleasant Street. It was a sort of cultural center at the time, and it was where Zionist meetings were held every Sunday morning.

Among the members of the "Guards of the White and Blue" was Matthew Kaplan, with whom I became a staunch friend, through college days and beyond. Matthew's brother Nate and his father were fervent Zionists when they lived in West Hartford. What a wonderful friend Matthew was until his demise at the early age of fifty-five. Anyone living in West Hartford, in those early days of the "Guards" was considered rich. Matthew lived up to this reputation and he used to treat club members to pie and other goodies when we marched down to the Baggish Bakery on nearby Windsor Street, after the meetings.

Another strong advocate of Zionism, I remember, was

Sam Rulnick, founder of the Hartford Stamp Works. His leaning was toward Poale Zion (Workers of Zion). He had so much confidence in Israel becoming a homeland for the Jewish people, that he did not hesitate to invest in land, that today stand as Kibbutz settlements and orange plantations. I also remember that Jewish National Fund boxes were traditional in every Jewish home. My mother, of blessed memory, was so good-hearted, that all types of tin charitable boxes adorned our kitchen shelf. Friday at licht benchen (candle lighting), each box had to receive a few kupkiss (coins).

How I marveled at our Jewish leaders and ardent Zionists of the day, Justice Louis D. Brandeis and Rabbi Steven S. Wise. I loved the latter's deep and powerful voice. As a student at New York University 1924-28, I would visit his Temple services on Sunday mornings, to be imbued and to feel the glory of his presence and enthusiasm for Palestine.

I must say, to have witnessed in my lifetime, the final result of years of pioneering and ardent fervor and the many centuries of praying for Palestine as a homeland for the Jewish people, I thank G-d to have lived to see this happen.

Glossary

Bar Mitzva - Affirmation of faith in the Jewish tradition at age 13. (Bat Mitzva for girls).

Blintzes - Thin dough filled with cheese or fruit (blueberries, strawberries).

Borscht - Beet soup

Bracha - Blessing

Challah - Generally, braided white bread baked especially for the Sabbath and Festivals.

Cheder - Jewish expression for Hebrew School

Es, Es, Es - Eat, eat, eat

Gemorah - The second of two parts that comprise the Talmud. Mishna is the first part. Gemorah is a discussion of law by the scholars in the academies of learning.

Golden Rule in Judaism - "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself"

Granitz - Jewish term indicating crossing the border.

Haftorah - A selection from the books of the Prophets assigned to the parasha, chanted immediately after the reading of the Torah.

Hanukkah - Commemorating the revolt of the Hasmonean Family against the Greek rulers.

Hazzan - Cantor

Isaiah 51:12 - 52:12 - The Haftorah portion assignable to my Bar Mitzva day, and the number of the pages read.

The Books of the Bible consist of the following:

Joshua & Judges

Samuel I & II

Kings I & II

Isiah

Jeremiah

Ezekiel

The Twelve Prophets

The Psalms

Proverbs

Job

The Five Megilloth

Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah

Chronicles I & II

Jewish Penicillin - Chicken Soup

Kerachina Groiten - Groats

Kiddush - Sanctification of the Sabbath by a blessing over a cup of wine.

Koretza - Hebrew name of a synagogue

Kreplach - A thin dough filled with cheese or blueberries, then browned.

Kugel - A pudding made with potatoes or rice and raisins.

Kupkiss - Coins

Licht benchen - Candle lighting

Lontzleit - Countrymen

Lugtch - Nickname for tall in Yiddish

Lukshen - Noodles

Mazel Tov - Good luck

Melamed - Teacher

Miechel - Delicacy

Mishna - The first of two parts of the Talmud

Mispocha - Family

Mohel - Title in Hebrew, attributable to person performing circumcisions.

Motell - Forename in Yiddish

Parasha - The portion of the Torah to be read on a particular Sabbath of the liturgical year. Also during Monday and Thursday morning services.

Passover - A spring festival beginning on the 15th day of the Jewish month of Nisan, lasting eight days. Commemorates the exodus from Egypt.

Petza - A jellied ingredient from calves' hooves

Phylacteries - Two small square leather boxes containing slips inscribed with scriptural passages used at daily morning services.

Pierogies - Dough filled with cherries or potatoes

Pirkai Avoth - "Ethics of the Fathers"

Poale Zion - Workers of Zion

Purim - A festive holiday commemorating the victory of the Jews over the Persians.

Reverend - Title of a religious official

Rosh Hashanah - This is the Jewish New Year when Jews reaffirm their faith, examine their past conduct and pray for forgiveness. The Shofar (ram's horn) is blown to reawaken their responsibility to the Lord and call them to repentance.

Shabbas - Saturday, the 7th day of the week for Jews, a day of rest, prayer and rejoicing.

Shadchen - Marriage broker

Shavuoth - Jewish holiday commemorating the time of the giving of the Torah.

Shochet - Jewish ritual performer

Shofetim - The parasha occurring on my 13th birthday, comprising the fourth chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, one of the five books of the Torah.

Simchas Torah - The Torah (Five Books of Moses) is read in its entirety each year. On this happy day, the reading is completed and begun anew. The sacred scrolls are carried around the synagogue in procession.

Tallis - Prayer shawl

Talmud - Comprised of two parts interpreting the Torah, namely "Mishna" and "Gemorah."

Talmud Torah - School of learning for Hebrew children

Tashlich - Custom for Jews to go to a river, on the first afternoon of Rosh Hashonah, and symbolically empty their pockets, casting their sins away.

Tfillin - Phylacteries, two small square leather boxes containing slips inscribed with scriptural passages and traditionally worn on the left arm and forehead by Jewish men during morning weekday prayers.

Torah - The five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

Verrinikes - Cut up slices of thin dough

Vishnik - A special drink made with whiskey and cherries.

Yahrzeit - The anniversary of a day of death on the Hebrew calendar.

Yarmulka - Skull cap

Yizkor - Memorial services at synagogues at four times during the Jewish year, coinciding with the holidays of Passover, Shavuoth, Succoth and Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur - The holiest day of the year, when the Lord judges each individual. Jews fast all day, confess and repent, and ask pardon from the Lord and from their fellow men.



From the collection of Herman Davidson:

Graduation

left to right: Ida Davidson Greenspon, the author's sister,
Ada Davidson, cousin.



From the author's collection:
The author's father, Usher Davidson



From the author's collection:
Ida and Jacob Pollack, the author's aunt and uncle

Born in Brody, Austria on August 20, 1906, **Morris I. Davidson** emigrated to the United States when he was two years old, and grew up in Hartford, Connecticut. After graduation from the Hartford Public High School in 1924, Mr. Davidson attended New York University where he received the Bachelor in Commercial Science degree. Mr. Davidson has engaged in the profession of public accounting from 1929 to the present. During World War II he served the United States Government in the Treasury Department, and thereafter worked in accounting for the State of Connecticut, and for private clients.

Following the death of his beloved brother Joseph, Mr. Davidson began the series of recollections which became ***Growing Up In Hartford, 1908-1928***. In this collection, Mr. Davidson has attempted to convey an entertaining blend of historical fact and personal memories of the period.

The Davidson name had an interesting origin. My mother's aunt, sister to my grandfather, had arranged for her husband Jacob Davidson to welcome the arrival of my dad to the United States. After a harsh trip crossing the Atlantic Ocean in third-class steerage, he arrived at Ellis Island. The admitting officer asked for his last name, and dad accordingly replied, "Verabyuf." The admitting officer said to my uncle, "'Verabyuf,' kind of hard to spell? Let's say Davidson will prevail." And so, the adopted name did prevail. My brother Joe and his son Gordon, both actively and successfully engaged in the dramatic world, might have preferred "Verabyuf" for its artistic flavor!

ANDREW MOUNTAIN PRESS

P.O. BOX 14353

HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT 06114

ISBN 0-916897-1215

\$4.00