

Thoughts from Paul Baker:

Max Baker, my father, was born in a town called Chvonik, in Russia. I wonder if that town could be Khoynik, a town in Belarus on the border with the Ukraine. The year of his birth was either 1892 or 1893. When he was almost 12 years old, the family barn burned down and their cow was killed. To get the 50 rubles necessary to buy another, my father was apprenticed to a shoemaker in Kiev. My dad has told me that he lived with his employer, who was very benevolent, and taught him to read and write in Hebrew so he could be Bar Mitzvahed. I don't know if this event took place in Chvonik or in Kiev. Kiev was said to be 200 miles (or kilometers) from Chvonik, and that corresponds to the distance from Kiev to Khoynik on a contemporary map.

All facts or dates must rely on the memory of a boy who heard these tales from Max and my grandfather, Yakov Moshe. Max's name in Russia was always Motel, and his Hebrew name was Mordecai, after his grandfather (maternal? paternal?) We had always known his last name to be Pekorowsky. It was Uncle Louis Cohen, already living in Chicago, who chose the surname Baker, so they'd have a Yankee name and he may have also chosen the name Max.

Max and his brother, Sam, came to the United States in 1911, either aboard a ship called Riga, or from the port of Riga, Latvia. They arrived at Ellis Island and moved directly to Chicago to be close to Louis Cohen. Max and Sam lived together. Max worked in a shoe factory, and Sam enrolled in pharmacy school. Max was active in Yiddish Theater, primarily as an amateur or minor professional. My brother, Fred, and I would accompany our parents to Yiddish theater years later. Dad would entertain my mother's family with dramatic Yiddish excerpts and Yiddish show songs. When he was in his 80s and living in Dallas, he appeared on a radio program and sang some Yiddish songs. When asked how long he knew these tunes, he replied "60 or 65 years".

When Sam graduated from pharmacy school, he went to Gary, Indiana, where he worked for my uncle, Morris Lieberman (my mother's brother), who owned a drug store at 2200 Broadway, Gary, Indiana. Morris had married Rose Porges, my father's cousin. My parents were close to several different related families who were not Bakers.

Louis Cohen was a widower, and had three children: Ben, who I never met, Alice, and Nathan. Louis was my maternal grandmother's brother. The Porges family were: Rose, Jimmy, Mort, or Mortimer (probably named after the same grandfather as my dad), and David and Lillian.

Then there were Hilda and Harry Harris and their son, Raymond. And the Halsingers, who had a lovely daughter, Iris, and the Robinovs, whom I knew as a child in

New York. I'm not certain how they all fit in this Baker saga, and assume they were descended, or married into the maternal line through Grandma Pearl.

My mother was the youngest sister of Morris Lieberman. Morris had married Rose Porges. I don't know if my parents met each other through Morris and Rose, or if they already knew each other in Chicago. Morris and Rose named their two sons Fred and Paul, in the same order as my brother, Fred and I. In fact, these cousins would call my parents Uncle Cousin and Auntie Cousin, as we also addressed their parents. Sam, who was also a cousin to Rose Porges Lieberman, then lived in Gary, working for Morris until he returned to Chicago to open his own pharmacy. Incidentally, Morris Lieberman ran for Mayor in Gary in 1916, I believe. He ran as a Socialist and obviously lost.

My parents married in 1916 in Chicago, where my brother, Fred, was born on May 23, 1917. My dad said that Fred's birth gave me an immediate draft deferral for World War I. My parents struggled financially and Max took a job in Rochester, New York in the early 1920s. They later moved to the Bronx, New York, where I was born on October 26, 1924. We endured the Depression as best we could, but the times were very grim. It is funny to realize that we lived in tenements on poetically named streets: Longfellow, Lowell and Bryant.

Fred and I both attended PS 75 in the Bronx and Fred went on to James Monroe High School. In November 1934 my father got a job in Chicago, and that enabled us to move there again. Dad went on ahead and we joined him on January 1, 1935, when Fred received his high school diploma.

I don't know when my dad became a naturalized citizen. I know that he was an ardent Socialist and he said he voted (?) in the 1916 election and supported Woodrow Wilson "because he kept us out of war." Mostly, his hero was Eugene V. Debs, who was jailed for his antiwar sentiments. Dad remained a Socialist until FDR in 1932, when he became an ardent New Dealer Democrat for the rest of his life.

Some of my early family recollections:

Alex Baker, who worked as a tailor for Sidney, on Staten Island, and who had a brief marriage, lived with us in the Bronx. He had a reputation for being an intellectual and a very difficult person. I was just 5 years old at the time. Alex had epileptic seizures (grand mal), and I was cautioned not to make noise because he needed to recover in a quiet setting. He scarcely noticed me and never spoke to me, and I kept my distance from him. He was always called Alex, whether in English or Yiddish, although Sasha would have been his Russian nickname. He was, nevertheless, called only Alex. Shortly before his death he moved to Staten Island to live with Rose and Sidney.

A much happier recollection is related to my Zaide, Yakov Moshe, who lived with us either later, or concurrently. He and I were great friends. He let me puff his pipe and I taught him some English. I wish I could speak Yiddish now as well as I did as a child. I called him Charlie and he was my great protector. Whenever my parents were

planning to kill me, he'd let me escape into his room and he stood at the door while I peered out from behind him. He would imperiously say "Don't put a hand on that child," in Yiddish, of course. I don't think my gentle father would have ever spanked me, but I felt smug and victorious because he was my ally and buddy. As he aged, he became more inform. Once he fell out in the street and was carried up to our apartment by two policemen. He also had cancer of the prostate. Rose and Sidney asked to have him moved to Staten Island, at that time out in the country. His condition worsened and he died. I wasn't allowed to attend his funeral, and I genuinely grieved for him. He was a little man, but I have always seen his resemblance to my 6 feet, 4 inches tall son, Cary.

I was 10-1/2 when we left the Bronx for Chicago and my grandfather had been dead for a few years.

Some of my New York recollections:

We visited Staten Island frequently. David and LaRea were my contemporaries and Lester (who also resembled my grandfather) was a few years younger. I went to Staten Island to see them, particularly, but also had fond feelings for the much older children of Nathan and Dina. I was especially fond of Henrietta, who once sketched my portrait. How I wished I could find that drawing, stuck away in a large book somewhere, but sadly it was long gone. But Sam, Abe and Dorothy showed me a friendly tolerance, and LaRea was my pal, even if she was a girl.

I also remember Tante Rayzel and Uncle Siman, and Ben, Arie and Morris Blumen, who lived all the way at the other end of Staten Island, in Stapleton.

Memories of the Robinovs have faded, but I actually retain the images of some of them and of the Halsingers and HARRISES.

The Bakers lived on Victory Blvd., in Tompkinsville and St. George. I thought it was neat to have all those villages in a single borough in New York.

I loved visiting Staten Island, not only to see my relatives, but to take that wonderful ferry boat ride between the Battery in Manhattan and the docks in Staten Island. My big adventure was sailing past Governor's Island, Ellis Island, and the Statue of Liberty, and looking back at the mind-blowing sight of a receding New York skyline. All the while I'd listen to some musicians playing what I later learned were some waltzes of Ivonovici, - Over the Waves and Danube Waves. No subsequent ocean trips were ever more appreciated or enjoyed.

In Chicago we seemed to gravitate more to my mother's family, although I knew and liked Lester, Buddy (Arthur) and Howard Baker; but I always felt like a newcomer or outsider. Years later, after the deaths of Lester (who had lived in California), and of Buddy, who lived in Chicago, I met Howard Baker and his wife, Margie, while my wife, Sorelle, and I, and they, attended some alumnae classes at Northwestern University. It turned out that we were living just a few miles from one another, and didn't even know it.

His untimely death was devastating to his family, and a sad loss for Sorelle and me, who had just gotten to know them.

I went to Northwestern University as an undergraduate and to the University of Illinois Medical School. I had an internship, residency and fellowship in Psychiatry, and served in the U.S. Navy and U.S. Public Health Service, but always lived with the special sadness that the two Lester Bakers (my middle name is also Lester), and David, all doctors of great distinction, and Drs. Arthur (Buddy) and Howard, both dentists, and I, could not share the bonds of professional fellowship that would have been a special pleasure as we got older. Who could have guessed that Max, Sam and Sidney, as well as the large extended family would have come for a decadent, miserable country in steerage, on a leaky, rusting ship, to give their progeny the opportunity to develop successful lives. I've not forgotten Harold and Lillian's son, Joel, who has long lived in California, and has been in a field akin to mine. And what of the lawyers, businessmen and academicians, etc., that brighten our family tree; and we're not done yet, by any means!

My wonderful wife of 55 years, Sorelle, is the mother of our two great sons, Cary and Gregg, who are married to Sharon and Carla. Sorelle has two graduate degrees, taught literature at the college level, and for twenty years has been a social worker in her second career. My sons and daughters in-law are wonderful, educated and competent people, each with a unique career, and are our prides and joys.

Incidentally, Gregg and Carla have three little girls, 7 year old Ilana, and 3 year old twins, Dalia and Shira. That reminds me of our family trait that had not been mentioned. The twins are not identical, and Dalia is a redhead. My first nickname was Red. My brother, Fred, was a redhead, as was his son, Jeff. All through our family history, redheads have popped up here and there. Are there any other redheads in the several generations that have succeeded our immigrant ancestors?

We wish you all a happy family reunion and regret that we can't be there too.

**Paul L. Baker**  
**June 2006**