

Photos Reveal a Single Point In A Multi-generational Family Dry Cleaning Business

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Just as every picture is worth a thousand words, so it is with every collection gift that comes to the Dutchess County Historical Society. Whatever the object, be it a manuscript, an item of clothing, a painting or a photograph, there is always a story behind the obvious physical nature of the item, and the search for the story often goes down unexpected paths to reveal historical narratives quite unexpected. The 2015 receipt of fifteen [photographs of Poughkeepsie's first dry cleaning establishment](#), and the research that followed, led to a greater understanding of Poughkeepsie's Jewish community in the early years of the 20th century.

The late 1920s or early 1930s photographs were donated by Jessica Rodd, a descendant of the Gold family of Poughkeepsie, and depict the employees and machinery of the United Cleaners and Dyers, located at 114 – 118 Smith Street.

The origins of the business date back to 1910 when Rebecca Cipnic established the New York Steam Cleaning business at 6 Liberty Street. By 1915 the business had been sold to Rebecca's brother Samuel Gold and her brother-in-law Harry Gilman who renamed the company the New



DCHS Collections. Gift of Jessica Rodd.

York Steam Cleaning and Dye Works. Circa 1916 Sam Gold bought out his partner and by 1921 he was living on Smith Street and had a factory at 6 High Street. That same year Gilman was again listed as a partner along

with Thomas Weissman. The steady growth of the business was interrupted on June 12, 1923 when the dyeing plant was destroyed in a fire. The June 13th edition of the Poughkeepsie Eagle-News reported that the brick dye house and the surrounding frame buildings had been all or partially consumed by a blaze of unknown origin. The combination of gasoline and other combustibles used in the dry cleaning process made it impossible for the firemen to do more than contain the fire to the plant. Thomas Weissman, one of the proprietors of the plant, was severely burned when his clothing caught on fire. By 1925 the business, now known as United Cleaners and Dyers, had rebounded and rebuilt on Smith Street in the buildings depicted in the photographs. By this time Moe Scheer and Alexander Stall had joined as partners and by the 1930s the business had dozens of stores in the Hudson Valley stretching from Mamaroneck to Albany and employing over 300 workers as tailors, spotters, finishers and dyers. By 1934 the company had expanded beyond its Liberty Street store to 13 College View – a handy location for the young ladies of Vassar. The business was still strong after World War II when the sons of each of the partners were taken into the business.

In her book ***"The Jewish Community of Poughkeepsie, New York, An Anecdotal History"*** Eva Efron Acker Goldin references the cleaning and dyeing business and provides some biographical information on the Gold



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family. Missing from the book is the story of how the Cipnics and the Golds found their way to Poughkeepsie and the forces that impelled their journeys.

It is believed that Rebecca, born c. 1886 in Austria, was the wife of Jacob Cipnic, born 1881 in Bialostock, Russia. Both are believed to have arrived in the United States around 1903 and various sources list their marriage as 1906. At the end of the 19th century the majority of the population of Bialostock was Jewish as seen in the Russian census of 1897 that documented that 41,900 of the 66,000 inhabitants of the city were Jews. The foremost economic driver of the city was the textile industry and many of the city's mills were owned and operated by Jews. Not surprisingly the strength of the Jewish labor movement displeased Russian authorities. If, as reported, Jacob left Bialostock in 1903, he did so just three short years before the June 1906 anti-Jewish pogrom in the city that left 70 dead and 90 seriously injured.



While there is little documentation about where Rebecca came from in Austria or what led to her emigration, it is likely that her story mirrored that of her brother Samuel Gold. According to the 1920 census Sam was born c. 1890 in Austria. He immigrated to the United States in 1912, spoke English, was a dyer by trade, was married and had two sons, ages 4 and 1. The census lists him as living on Rose Street and identifies his neighbors as Borisha Monrak from Hungary, and Alexander Stall, Hubert Kaplan, and Lazarus Mansnick, all from Russia. Other sources, such as his World War I Draft Registration Card give his birthdate as August 27, 1889 and show his place of birth as Bulstyn, Galicia, Austro-Poland. Bulstyn is likely Burshtyn in the western Ukraine. The story of the Jews of Galicia under Austrian-Polish Rule from 1867 – 1918 is a complex and important part of the history of the Jewish Diaspora. For purposes of this article the period can be summarized as one of great economic hardship for Jews and little opportunity for improvement of their socio-economic status. As a result in the years between 1881 – 1910 the United States naturalized 3,091,692 immigrants from Austrian lands. While Sam Gold arrived slightly later it can be assumed the same forces were driving him to find a better life in America.

On the surface, the fifteen photographs from Jessica Rodd depict a thriving Poughkeepsie business. Tanks and vats point to the complexity and dangerous conditions of the dry cleaning and dyeing business. Women workers figure prominently in the photographs in specialized jobs such as finishers and seamstresses. But, as is often the case, the story behind the photographs is just as, if not more interesting than the photographs themselves. It's the story of Jews from eastern Europe and Russia who found their way to Poughkeepsie, started new lives, worked hard, overcame hardships, and became well respected and successful members of the city that welcomed them. A picture is worth a thousand words ! (or in this case, 987).

Note: The donor's uncle, Burt Gold, was interviewed at the time of the gift and provided much of historical information regarding the photographs. Today, the business is still owned and operated by a descendant of partner Moe Scheer, evolving into a rare and highly specialized business. Moe Scheer's grandson, Jonathan Scheer (the son of Hamilton Scheer, who was also deeply involved in running the business, and Barbara Scheer) is Pres. and [CEO of J. Scheer & Co.](#), a firm specializing in the conservation cleaning and preservation of wedding gowns, exhibition couture, and historic textiles. He has studied conservation science and care of museum collections at the Smithsonian Institution's Conservation Analytical Laboratory and the Art Institute of Chicago, among other such institutions.

