GROWING UP IN THE BORSCHT BELT

Shabbat Shalom. Nina, thank you for inviting me to participate in this program. The title of my talk is: "Growing Up in the Borscht Belt". Preparing for tonight has allowed me to identify the people, events and places important to my Jewish identity. It has been an interesting and moving process that has also afforded me an opportunity to reconnect with family from my distant past. In the moment it is often difficult to understand and recognize the significance of ones experiences. This time of reflection has provided me with a better understanding of how I arrived at this place in my life.

My father was told by his father, Samuel Black (known as Zusha Plakhin in Belarus) that his ancestors fled from Spain to Padua, Italy during the Inquisition. Later they immigrated to Eastern Europe. My grandfather was born in Polatsk (Belarus). As a young man he was drafted into the Russian army, but unlike most non-Jewish peasants in the army, he was literate and the only soldier in his regiment who could write. Thus, he was selected to be the Colonel's scribe. He immediately began practicing the Colonel's signature and made plans to escape by boat to Germany. He forged a pass and made his way to Hamburg where in 1903 at the age of 21 he boarded a ship to America. In the U.S. his last name morphed from Plakhin to Platch to Platt. When he applied for citizenship, in order to keep his interaction with the immigration officer to a minimum, he did not protest at being called Samuel Black. My grandfather was one of seven children and the only one to leave Russia. My father's mother (Zena Labcowsky) was born in Vitebsk (Belarus). At the age of 18, in 1908, she came to America with her brother and sister. My grandparents were married in 1909. They were secular Jews and actively supported the Jewish community. One of my grandfather's nephews emigrated to Palestine in the early 1930's and was a founding member of Kibbutz Hulda. My father, Abraham, the third of three children, was born in Passaic Park, New Jersey in 1916. My father was not Bar Mitzvah.

My grandmother on my mother's side, Tillie Locker, was born in 1898 in Solotwina, Galicia. She always identified herself as Austrian which is understandable since Galicia was part of the Austrian Empire when she was a child. In addition to Yiddish and English, she spoke Polish and some Russian. I suspect that she was really Polish. Her brother, Hyman, the eldest, arrived in the U.S. in 1908. He brought three of his sisters to America over the next 20 years. My grandmother arrived in New York in 1913. Hyman was a successful businessman and begged his parents and his four other siblings to come to America. They refused and all except for the youngest son, Moishe, were lost in the Holocaust. My Uncle Moishe was conscripted by the Russian army. He came to the U.S. from a German Displaced Persons Camp in 1948. He married Aunt Sarah, a Polish Jew who survived off the land during the German occupation of Poland. My mother's father, Alexander Hanig was born in Königsberg, Germany in 1889. According to my mother, her father, four siblings and their mother arrived in America together. Tillie and Alexander were married in 1916. My mother, Eleanor, the first of two children, was born in 1918 in Spring Valley, New York and lived on the family farm. After her father died when she was 4 years old, my grandmother, her mother-in-law and the two young

children moved to Sullivan County to care take a small farm in the heart of what was to become the Borscht Belt. My grandmother kept a kosher home. From the time her second husband died in 1953 until 1970, she operated a fruit and vegetable market in Mountaindale, NY. I worked with her for one summer when I was sixteen. Mountaindale was a true American shtetl. About 2/3 of the hamlet's 1100 residents were Jewish. There were two kosher butchers, two Jewish bakeries, a fish market and a variety of other stores to meet every need. There was no need to go elsewhere to shop. Almost all of the businesses were Jewish owned. This concentration of Jews was unique for a rural area. There were always Hassidim around – big beards, big families, women wearing wigs and boys with payas. The hubbub made it a fascinating place to visit when I was a child. It is now hard for me to imagine how a community that size could have been be so vibrant.

My parents met at a party in New York City in the early 1940's. They eloped and married in 1942. I was born in October 1944 and was the first of three children. We moved from NYC to New Jersey in 1947 shortly after the birth of my brother, and in 1950, six months after the arrival of my sister, we moved to Kerhonkson – a small village with a population of about 1000 - in rural New York, 95 miles north of the City, at the edge of the Catskills. The basis of the local economy was farming and tourism. My parents did not keep a kosher home. We celebrated Chanukah and shared Passover seders with family. My mother went to synagogue during the High Holy Days. I not recall going to Shabbat services with her and I do not remember my father attending any services, except for family Bar Mitzvahs. My parents were secular Jews and ardent supporters of Israel; they made their first aliyah to Israel in 1965. My mother could read, write and speak Yiddish. My father understood it and could converse a bit. They used Yiddish as a secret language to talk about things they did not want us to know about. Living close to New York City and its large Jewish population I would often hear Yiddish songs on the radio – songs I still enjoy when I hear them.

I have a vague memory of attending Sunday school at the Jewish Center adjacent to the shul when I was a young child. A few years later I began studying Hebrew twice a week after school in preparation for my Bar Mitzvah. Talmud Torah was neither an engaging or pleasant experience. I had a difficult time reading Hebrew without understanding the meaning of the words. I was not a good student and my Jewish education was poor. Our synagogue was Orthodox, as were almost all of the small town synagogues in the Catskills. I am not sure how old I was before I realized that not all synagogues were small, white stucco or wood buildings with the same floor plan - a central bimah with pews facing it on three sides, an ark, and an upper gallery on three sides that provided separate seating for women.

Although we lived only 20 miles from my grandmother, Kerhonkson was more diverse - about 10% of the population were Jews. They were shop and resort owners, farmers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, plumbers, electricians, etc. Our minority status was evident in the public schools, especially in elementary school at Christmastime when we learned and sang numerous Christmas songs. Chanukah gift giving, at that time paled in comparison to Christmas. We received one or two Chanukah gifts as well as a few gifts on

Christmas Day. A tree, although we asked for one, was out of the question. However, I do recall cutting down a tree in a field near my house with a friend and carrying it to my 6th grade classroom. The tree was close to 20' tall - much too tall to stand it up in the room. Out of curiosity, I would sometimes skip school to join friends attending their weekly catechism. I also remember attending Methodist and Catholic Christmas Eve services with friends and discussing Jewish views about Heaven and Hell with them. I do not recollect blatant anti-Semitism in my hometown where the only village cop was Jewish, and the Jewish community was significant enough in terms of numbers, wealth and influence to keep it well in the background. However, there was occasionally talk about two classic, prominent, nearby resorts that catered to the wealthy from the NY metropolitan area that were known to have a past history of "no Jews allowed".
The area of the Catskills where I lived was often referred to as the "Borscht Belt" a popular vacation destination for New York City Jews from the 1920s through the 1970s, about the same distance as we are from Portland. The Catskills as I knew them can be traced to the German philanthropist Baron de Hirsch, who 100 years ago devoted $50 million to founding the Jewish Colonization Association which supported Jewish farmers - the Return to the Land movement. In order to help make ends meet some of the farms took on summer borders – the beginning of what was to come. Concurrently, the growing Jewish population was becoming more affluent and wanted an escape from the stifling heat of the concrete city. Additionally, before the 1960's vacation options for Jews were limited due to discrimination. The rise of the Borscht Belt, within a few hours drive of New York City, changed the rural economy of the Catskills. In its heyday, when I was a teenager, there were close to a thousand hotels - ranging in size from 100 guests to several thousand. There were nearly as many bungalow colonies – self sufficient living units with many of the same amenities as the hotels - swimming, entertainment, social activities, and mahjong everywhere. By the 1950s, more than half a million people inhabited the summer world of bungalow colonies, summer camps and hotels in the Catskills to enjoy the cool, fresh, clean air. To me, at the time, it felt like an invasion beginning the Fourth of July and a retreat on Labor Day. Nearly all of the hotels were kosher and the food was prepared in the finest East European tradition. And there was always a lot of it. The hotels served as the venue for eating, outdoor sports activities, entertainment and socializing. Families would sometimes stay for several weeks at a time. Guests were dependent on the resort for their social activities and entertainment. Jobs at these hotels during the summer and weekends at larger year round hotels paid for the college education of many young people who called the Catskills home. I worked as a busboy and waiter throughout my high school and college years. I recall being in awe of guests with numbers tattooed on their arms. Yiddish was pervasive and The Forward was at least as popular as the Times. Nearly every prominent Jewish comedian during the last half of the 20th Century worked the Borscht Belt. It was a wonderful way to spend the summer. Beginning in the 1970s, due to affordable home air conditioning and air travel, the automobile glut and higher incomes, the Catskills lost favor with the much of the Jewish population. Today, the resorts that are still open are mostly owned or operated by the ultra-Orthodox.

In 1962 I entered the University of Buffalo as an undergraduate. Although there were several Jewish fraternities on campus I joined a non-Jewish fraternity. There were two Jews in my pledge class. We were the first. I met my wife, Geraldine, in 1965 while we were both students at UB. We were married five years later at the Spanish Portuguese Synagogue in Manhattan. Future visits with her father's family in Caracas exposed me to Sephardic traditions and foods – a wonderful new Jewish world opened to me. We moved from Gainesville, Florida to Eugene in 1974. The following year we bought a home behind the Portland Street TBI.

Looking back, it saddens me to recall that from the time of my Bar Mitzvah in 1957 until 1983, my presence in synagogue was limited to a few Bar Mitzvahs and weddings. The Judaism I experienced as an adolescent left me with no desire to participate. Even during the years we lived within earshot of the shofar and the lively celebrations I had little interest in being involved. Our dog, however, regularly visited Rabbi Kinberg in his study. Occasionally Myron would walk her back to our house. My reconnection with Judaism occurred just prior to the naming ceremony our first child, Tovah. Since we felt that it was important for Tovah to learn about Jewish culture and religion and develop a Jewish identity we enrolled her in TBI's preschool and a few years later in Talmud Torah. I came enjoy both the spiritual energy that surrounded Rabbi Kinberg, and the many beautiful voices that filled the Sanctuary during services. The Sanctuary is the only place I feel comfortable enough to sing in a voice loud enough for others to hear. Our connection became even more meaningful after we adopted Simy in 1990. The visit to a mikvah in Portland with Rabbi Kinberg for her conversion left a lasting impression on her as well me. In the mid 90's I served on the TBI board for several years and I still remember my discomfort in representing the Board in the Rabbi's contract negotiations. The 2011 TBI trip to Israel further influenced my life as an American Jew. Seeing the layers of history, hearing my cousin say, as he pointed out the car window, "There is the Valley of Elah where David fought Goliath.)", knowing that I am connected to that history, the feeling of pride regarding the accomplishments of Jews past and present in Israel and a greater understanding of the worldwide Jewish community were especially meaningful. I am currently enrolled in the first year of the Melton School with intention of gaining a better understanding of Judaism and strengthening my ties to the Jewish community. Until joining TBI I had no idea of the broad scope of Jewish practices. There are many ways to be a Jew. TBI provides me with the opportunity to appreciate, enjoy and participate in both the cultural and the religious aspects of Judaism. Learning about teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah helped me find a personally acceptable and meaningful understanding of God.

My genetic roots, direct ties to the Jewish history of Europe and Israel, my family ties to Israel, being a minority in a Christian country, the importance of education, the strong Jewish presence in the Catskills where I grew up, recognizing the Jewish role in world of entertainment, and participating in the TBI community have all been important in establishing my Jewish identity. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak about my

experiences as a Jew in America. Until participating in this program I had not given much thought about the people, places and events that have brought me to this moment. Shabbat Shalom.