

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

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The Cooper Family: An Immigrant Story

by David Safier

In 1915 Sarah Cooper moved into the house at 529 South Sharp Street where she opened a grocery store. It was two years after her husband was shot and killed in Lynchburg, Virginia, leaving her with six young children to raise on her own.

The Cooper family's life in the United States began 15 years earlier in 1900 when 26 year old David Cooper left Eastern Europe and arrived in Baltimore, where he spent the next two years saving enough money to bring 18 year old Sarah Silver to the U.S. so they could marry.

No one in the Cooper family became rich or famous. They were like many other immigrants, in their case Jewish immigrants, who came to this country to start a new life. Each family's history is unique, each person's story is unique, but the story of the Coopers provides a glimpse into the lives of many families who arrived in what is now the Otterbein neighborhood between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th.

Family histories like the Coopers' usually stay in the family if they are remembered at all. The reason I know this particular story is because one of the immigrant couple's children, Nathan Cooper, shared it with the Jewish Museum of Maryland in the form of a taped oral history, and one of his sons added a written history. The museum granted me access to the histories along with some other artifacts from the family, which I supplemented with information from census records, city directories and newspaper articles. Here is the story I pieced together.

Locust Point, 1900

David Cooper was 26 when he came to the United States in 1900, landing at Locust point in South Baltimore. He was from Taurage, which was part of Russia at the time but is now part of Lithuania. To get here, David first had to travel to Bremen, Germany, where he booked passage on The Frankfurt, one of the ships that sailed back and forth between Bremen and Baltimore.

At the time Baltimore was the second largest U.S. port for immigrants after New York. For many immigrants, it was a jumping off point; their final destination was one of a number of other cities a train ride away. In fact, people departing from Bremen could buy tickets for the B&O railroad at the same time they paid for their ocean passage, then step from the dock at Locust Point onto a waiting train without touching Baltimore soil.

While many new immigrants left Baltimore, others stayed.



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Most of the Jewish immigrants who chose Baltimore as their new home took a short ride to the Jewish section of East Baltimore, which is now the city's Little Italy. But a significant number settled closer to Locust Point in the area of Southwest Baltimore below Pratt Street, where they became part of two separate Jewish communities on either side of Camden Station. The fact that each community had two synagogues indicates the size of the Jewish population which settled in this area.

So many of the Jews who settled in what is now the Otterbein neighborhood were from Tuareg (also spelled Tavig) that the Anshe Emunah synagogue on Hanover Street just north of Welcome Alley was known as the Taviger Shul ("Shul" is Yiddish for synagogue).

When David arrived, he stayed with Isaac Davidson, whom he knew from the Old Country, at 732 South Charles Street.

Davidson's occupation was listed in the city directory as "Expressman," meaning he packaged and hauled cargo around the city. Later he founded a successful business, the Davidson Transfer Company, with its own fleet of trucks.

When David Cooper came to the U.S., he left his 16 year old girlfriend, Sarah Silver, behind, promising to save enough money to book her passage and make a life for the two of them here. The couple corresponded regularly during the two years it took David to save \$50 (about \$1,500 in today's money), at which time he sent for her. Like David, Sarah traveled alone. Her father said he would never leave their home, so Sarah's father and mother, her four sisters and one brother stayed behind.

David and Sarah were married in the Anshe Emunah synagogue soon after she arrived. Their first child, Dinah, was born in 1905. Nathan, whose oral history provided most of the material for this story, was born two years later. By 1910, the Coopers had five children.

Sometime around 1905 David and Sarah had moved to 412 South Sharp Street. David was a scrap metal dealer (His occupation was listed as "Junk" in the city directory). Nathan said that his was one of many Jewish families in the scrap metal business in Baltimore at the time. According to Nathan, "[My father] traveled in a horse and wagon. ... He was buying up iron, scrap metals and our back yard was his depository. I remember we had iron and all types of metals in the back yard piled up as high as the fence, and the fence must have been seven or eight feet high. ... We used to play there in that junk pile."

Allow me to indulge in a personal aside for a moment.

My grandfather Sam was also in the junk business. Sam arrived at Ellis Island from Poland in 1911. He first lived in New York, where my father was born, then brought his family to Southern



**Anshe Emunah Synagogue
513-519 S. Hanover St**



**David and Sarah Cooper,
from the Jewish Museum of
Maryland.**

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California where he opened a junk yard which bought and sold scrap metal and other items. It appears that buying and selling scrap metal was one part of the Jewish peddler tradition which put food on the table for so many Jewish immigrants.

Back to the Coopers.

Yiddish was the only language spoken in the Cooper home. When Nathan was six and began his formal education at Public School Number 4 on the corner of Hanover and Lee, an older boy had to translate for him until he learned enough English to understand what was going on in the classroom.

Lynchburg, Virginia 1913

From the time of David's arrival in the U.S. in 1900 until 1913, the Cooper family's life followed a path similar to that of many other Jewish immigrant families. Then tragedy struck.

In July of 1913, David Cooper rode his wagon to Lynchburg, Virginia, on one of his regular trips to buy scrap metal. Lynchburg is over 200 miles from Baltimore, which indicates how far from home David's buying trips took him. He had just stopped at a post office to pick up a package of food Sarah had sent for him. The family kept kosher, and David was unlikely to find a kosher meal on the road.

As David drove his horse and wagon from the post office, two young men were traveling toward him, riding in the back seat of a chauffeured automobile. The two had been drinking. Angry that a wagon was blocking the road, they got out of their car to pick a fight with David. After struggling with the two men, David managed to break free and get hold of the pistol he carried in his wagon for protection. He fired a warning shot in the air. The other men grabbed David and took his pistol. While one pinned him to the ground, the other shot him in the back, severing his spinal cord and leaving him paralyzed from the neck down.

David was taken to the hospital, but the doctors knew he wouldn't survive the gunshot wound. He lived for three weeks in a hospital bed with Sarah at his side. David Cooper was 39 when he died.

At first the two young men were charged with assault, but when David died, the charge was upgraded to murder. They were found guilty and sentenced to five years in the penitentiary.

The details of this story and the trial that followed were covered extensively in the press in Virginia and Baltimore, which is how I am able to include so many details about what happened.

In his oral history at the Jewish Museum, Nathan said he believed the two men who committed the senseless murder of his father came from prominent Virginia families, which is likely true, for two reasons. First, they were riding in the back seat of a chauffeur-driven car, which means they came from money. Second, the governor pardoned them after they served only 18 months of their five year sentences, which only happens when people have political connections.

The Hebrew Young Men's Association paid for David's funeral, which meant Sarah didn't have to deal with that expense.

David Cooper Unchanged.
The condition of David Cooper, of Baltimore, who was shot in Amherst county, Virginia, according to a dispatch to THE SUN last night, continues unchanged at the Lynchburg Hospital. While there has been slight improvement, the injury to Mr. Cooper's spine seems to preclude his ultimate recovery.

TWO INDICTED FOR MURDER

David Cooper, Of Baltimore, Died From Wounds Received.

Lynchburg, Va., Aug. 12.—John Beard and Bascom Williams were indicted today at Amherst Courthouse for the murder of David Cooper, the Baltimorean who died here Sunday, three weeks after being shot in Amherst county. Both prisoners were

BOTH GIVEN TERMS IN PENITENTIARY

John P. Beard and H. B. Williams Sentenced for Murder of Cooper.

PARDONED AFTER 18 MONTHS

Two Virginians Had Killed A Baltimore Peddler.
Lynchburg, Va., Feb. 21.—John Beard and Bascom Williams, who were convicted and sentenced to five years in the penitentiary in Amherst county on the charge of murdering David Cooper, a Baltimore peddler, in that county on July 13, have been pardoned by Governor Stuart. The men served 18 months of their terms.

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But David's death left her a single mother with five young children — Nathan, her second oldest, was seven — to care for. She was pregnant with a sixth.

After 1913

Distraught over her husband's death, Sarah wrote a long letter to her family in Taurage explaining her situation. Though Sarah's father had told her when she left for the U.S. that he had no intention of ever joining her, he immediately sold his belongings and traveled to Baltimore with his wife and children. That meant Sarah was surrounded by her family who gave her needed emotional support. But it also meant she had seven more people living in her home, seven more mouths to feed along with her six children.

Sarah got a little money from selling David's scrap metal business, but she had to move to a smaller, less expensive house on Charles Street to make ends meet. She opened a candy store there and eked out a meager living, but when the store was robbed, she had no money to replace her stock.

In 1915, Sarah and her family moved to 529 South Sharp Street and opened a grocery store with the help of a \$200 interest-free loan from the Hebrew Free Loan Association, which she eventually paid back in full.

Sarah did everything she could to make a success of her new venture. She walked two miles each way to buy fish for her store so she didn't have to pay the streetcar fare — a nickel to get there and a nickel to return. She tried to supplement their income with her dressmaking skills and by making lunches for some of the working women in the community, but neither attempt to earn extra money met with much success.

Nathan told a story of how he helped get coal for the kitchen stove during the cold winter months. Railroad tracks ran near their Sharp Street home. Nathan and other boys went to the side of the tracks with an orange crate filled with rocks. "When the trains would go through with cars of coal being shipped to the midwest," he remembered, "we would throw stones at the fella sitting on top of the coal. We didn't want to hit him, but we would throw stones at him. He would throw coal back at us, and we would collect the coal."

By this time, two of Sarah's sisters had married and moved away, and the two other sisters began working in a local factory, but the store and her sisters' wages were not enough to support them all. Sarah moved her family to the west side of Camden Station where she finally found success running a grocery store on Pulaski Street.

Success, a Growing Family, a Quiet Life

That is where the family's days in what is now the Otterbein neighborhood ended, but the Cooper family's lives continued. Here is a summary up to 1985, which is when Nathan gave his oral history to the Jewish Museum.

When Nathan turned 13 in 1920, a family friend found him a job at a dental laboratory. Years later, in 1932, he opened the Cooper Dental Lab which allowed him to live a comfortable life. His brother Harry became a dentist.

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Sarah ran her Pulaski Street grocery for more than 25 years. Her family, feeling she had worked long enough, moved her to North Baltimore so she could live near her children and grandchildren. At the time of her death at 86, Sarah had 10 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren.

One final story from Nathan. In Sarah's later years, she was a member of the Hebrew Noble Ladies' Society, a group that raised money to help others.. The Society held a party in Sarah's honor on her 80th birthday and gave a scholarship in her name to a young man so he could continue his education. Sarah sat at the front table along with her family.

Nathan hadn't been told he would be speaking at the gathering, but when he was asked to say a few words, he got up and addressed the assembly.

"You know," he recalled saying, "I haven't got much to say except a thank you for inviting us to this affair. I want you to know that we have been on the receiving end of charity from organizations such as this, and it's a pleasure to be on the giving end." With that he presented a check to the society. As he did, he told the story of the \$200 interest free loan his mother had received in 1915 and said, "This check is interest for all the years that we hadn't paid on that loan."