

SIMON AND RENA OGGINS, JEWISH IMMIGRANTS FROM LITHUANIA

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Simon Oggins was born in c. 1865 in the shtetl of Abolnik, near Kovno (now Kaunas) in Lithuania, then part of the Russian Empire. His actual name was Simon Melamdovich, but it was changed by U. S. immigration officials at Ellis Island in 1888 when he migrated to America with his wife Rena and two-year-old son David. The young family settled on the Lower East Side of New York's Manhattan Island, a mixed neighborhood of Eastern European Jews like themselves, and earlier Irish immigrants. To the Ogginses, the Irish were old, established Americans, so when their first American-born child came along in 1892, they named her Molly — their only child not to receive an Old Testament name. Simon worked for a few years as a peddler. He became an American citizen in 1893. Then, in 1894, he returned briefly to Russia, probably to collect a modest inheritance. He returned to the United States and almost immediately moved his family out of the Lower East Side to Willimantic, Connecticut, where (according to entries in Willimantic City Directories) he continued to work as a peddler of clothing.

A small Jewish community was coalescing in Willimantic in the 1890s, although Willimantic Jews were greatly outnumbered by Protestant Yankees and Roman Catholic Irish and French Canadians. The Oggins family lived briefly at 74 Elm Street, then moved to North Street, and finally to two other tenements on Center Street (first 22 Center, then 33 Center), a street and neighborhood that no longer exists. Center Street contained Willimantic's small Jewish neighborhood, including — when it was built a few years later — the synagogue. Simon and Rena had three more children: Isaiah ("Cy"), Rebecca ("Betty"), and Ethel (who died in infancy). Isaiah was born in the Catholic St. Joseph Hospital and attended Natchaug grammar school and Windham High School. In time, David moved back to New York (the Bronx) and became a lawyer, Molly married, and Isaiah went off to Columbia University. World War I affected the family greatly. It pushed David towards patriotism, nationalism, and Republican party politics. It pushed Isaiah in the other direction, towards anti-war activity and socialism. And the Great Influenza that accompanied the war and ravaged America killed Molly. Only a few months later, Simon, mourning his beloved daughter, died of a broken heart, only 56 years old. Rena and Betty left Willimantic as David and Isaiah did before them, moving in with David in the Bronx. Simon is the only Oggins buried locally.

Simon Oggins was buried in the Hebron Columbia Cemetery of the Hillel Burial Society, in Mansfield, CT, just beyond the Willimantic border. The Cemetery also contains the grave of Hyman Israel, a founder of the Jewish community and synagogue in Willimantic. Israel operated a lunch wagon on Railroad Street in Willimantic. Their presence in Willimantic

illustrates that Connecticut's mill towns attracted more than mill workers, owners, and managers — they also attracted small businesspeople who served the local communities.

For a source, see *The Lost Spy*, by Andrew Meier, a biography of Cy Oggins.



Above: The Center Street neighborhood in Willimantic in 1897, about the time the Oggins family moved to the city. Today, Temple, Center, and Broad Streets no longer exist, having been razed in the 1970s for an urban renewal or redevelopment project. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, though, this was Willimantic's immigrant neighborhood. The name Broad Street was accidentally left off the map, and Broad Street is labeled simply "St." The large structures labeled St. Joseph R. C. Ch. at the upper right of the map was St. Joseph's Hospital; despite the coloration on the map, the Hospital was a brick building. The Oggins family lived at two different addresses on Center Street, 22 Center (the brick tenement owned by T. A. Lyman on the 1897 map) and 33 Center (probably the wooden tenement on the other side of the street, owned in 1897 by S. F. Loomer, who also owned Willimantic's Loomer Opera House, on Main Street).



Above: Center Street in Willimantic, CT. The photo was taken c. 1970, shortly before the entire neighborhood was razed as part of an urban renewal or redevelopment project. Although the photo was taken long after the Ogginses were gone, the neighborhood would have looked much the same. The building shown is probably 33 Center Street, where the Oggins family once lived.



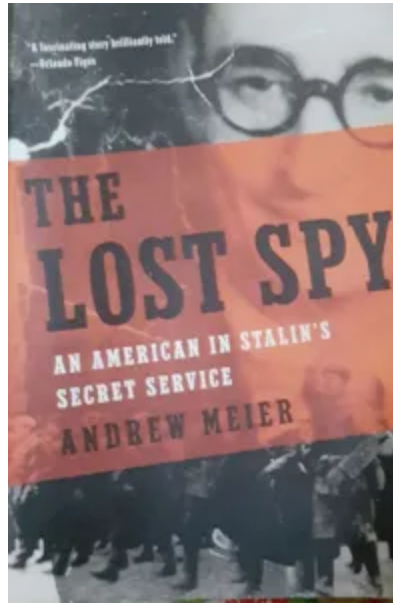
Above: The old Temple B'nai Israel in Willimantic, in the Center Street neighborhood. The photo was taken c. 1970, just before the entire neighborhood — including the Temple — was razed as part of an urban renewal or redevelopment project. The Temple was rebuilt, and the new Temple B'Nai Israel is on Jackson Street, in a mostly residential neighborhood near the edge of Willimantic.



Above: St. Joseph's Hospital on Jackson Street, where most of the Oggins children were born. The Hospital was located only a few blocks from Center Street. The building is still there, but is now the home of the Holy Family Shelter and is no longer a hospital.



Above: Grave of Simon M. Oggins in the Hebron Columbia Cemetery in Mansfield, CT, just outside of Willimantic. The date is based on the Jewish calendar. Cemeteries for different religious groups speak to the various different immigrant groups who came to live in Connecticut's mill towns.



Above: A biography of Simon and Rena's son Cy Oggins.