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## The Spirits of My Ancestors Are in Loving Hands

**Margaret Anne Goldsmith Hanaw**  
(Shares her 1994 trip to Hoppstadten Germany, the  
ancestral home of the Schiffman family of Huntsville)

*Thank you for the amulet you had made for me, it is wonderful and a great surprise. It must have been telepathic that you sensed that I would like the three pines as a motif. When I wear the amulet I think of you and Bobbie for it is a beautiful symbol and sign of our spontaneous and wonderful friendship. The fossilized ivory from which it was carved too is meaningful to me in that it belonged to a creature that lived on a different continent long ago. Your ancestors lived many years ago on a different continent, ancestors with whom you are now better acquainted.*

*Margaret Anne, the more I learn about your religious, cultural and social background, the more I am realizing how fatal it can be not to know or to ignore other peoples' backgrounds. One can avoid many misunderstandings and conflicts by knowing and accepting other people's wants and opinions. That's why it feels so good to be able to talk to you, to share our experiences and to feel that we understand each other.*

The above are excerpts from a letter to me from Lissy Bamback written six months after I met her in Hoppstadten, Germany, birthplace of Isaac Schiffman, my great-grandfather. It is also the train stop from where all my Schiffman relatives who did not escape to America were deported to Auschwitz during the War.

Early last summer my daughter, Bobbie, and I traveled through Germany, visiting cemeteries, museums and former sites of Jewish presence including the villages and towns where our ancestors once lived. Although no remaining family survived the War,

we sensed the presence of their spirits which seemed to guide us. It was in Hoppstadten, home of the Schiffmans, where we made our strongest connection with our roots and our past.

On a warm July morning we took the train from Frankfurt and traveled southwest through the rolling hills of wine growing countryside to the village of Hoppstadten, a town of two thousand located near the River Nehe Nehe. It was noon when we arrived, lunch time, and all the stores were closed. Luckily, the door to one shop was open and we went in to ask for the location of the Jewish cemetery in a mixture of few words and sign language since the proprietor did not speak English. He said, "Moment," while he phoned his daughter. Within five minutes a lovely young woman appeared on her bicycle and greeted us with a warm "Hello," followed by an offer to be our guide for the day.

As we strolled up a hillside on the edge of town, Lissy chatted away as though we were old friends. She told us how she often goes to the Jewish cemetery to pick hazelnuts and to sit and think about the fact that there are no Jews left in Hoppstadten to visit the graves. It makes her sad, she said, so she visits them. Through her visits Lissy has developed a connection to and a sense of guardianship for the spirits of the past. When we reached the hilltop, Lissy pointed out three pine trees which, like three sentinels, guard the gates of the cemetery. The gate was locked, but Lissy showed us a place where we could slip through the wooden fence. The old gravestones, made of local rock, are weathered and many have lost the metal plaques identifying the graves. However, we easily found the brown marble headstone of great-great-grandmother Caroline Schiffman, the largest gravestone in the cemetery, purchased undoubtedly by Isaac for his mother. We did not find great-great-grandfather Gustav's grave; however, near Caroline's marker we did find Lob Schiffman's grave, my great-great-great-grandfather. The children of Joseph, Isaac's brother, all came to America during the thirties. There are no graves for the children of Isaac's sister Johanna. My grandfather helped one child escape to America, another escaped to Israel, the others died in deathcamps.

Just outside the fenced "1870-1937" section of the cemetery is a much older section hidden in the woods that dates back to the

sixteen hundreds when Jewish settlers first came to the village. Nature is reclaiming this part of the cemetery with many of the headstones broken, half buried, and covered with moss. We sat there in the shade sharing our bread and cheese while I told Lissy about my Schiffman ancestors and what I knew about my great-grandfather Isaac.

Isaac Schiffman came to Huntsville, Alabama, from Hoppstadtten, Germany, in 1875 to work for his uncles, Solomon and Daniel Schiffman, who had come from Hoppstadtten to America in 1857. They settled in Huntsville sometime before the Civil War. Solomon and Daniel had a dry goods and clothing store on the north side of the Square, identified today by the municipal numbers 117-119. Perhaps young Isaac asked to join his uncles. They probably needed him to help in the store. Whatever the reason, young Isaac joined his uncles in 1875 and went to work for them in their mercantile business. In 1885, Isaac married Bettie Herstein, the eldest daughter of Robert and Rosa Herstein. Robert Herstein had immigrated to Huntsville from Germany before the Civil War and married Rosa Blemlin of Baltimore. Isaac and Bettie had three children, Annie, my grandmother, Irma and Bob. After his uncles died, Isaac remained in the mercantile business until 1905, at which time he became engaged in the investment and cotton business. In 1908, his son Robert and his son-in-law, my grandfather, Lawrence B. Goldsmith, Sr., joined him in business and a partnership was formed. In 1905, Isaac bought the wonderful limestone faced building on the Southeast corner of the East side of the Square that today bears his name on the facade, to house his growing business interests. Isaac died from diabetes in 1910, relatively young; for during those days there was no treatment for that condition.

The other facts I knew and shared with Lissy about Isaac were that he was chairman of the building committee for Temple B'nai Sholom constructed in 1899, and I knew too that Isaac had returned to Hoppstadtten around 1900 with his family for a visit. By then he had become a successful businessman. On the occasion of that visit, I had been told that Isaac had given the village of Hoppstadtten funds to build a water system. Later he sent funds to the Jewish community for a school building. During his visit Isaac granted each of his nieces and nephews a request or gift. One neph-

ew, Leo, asked to come to America. Isaac granted his request and Leo lived with his aunt and uncle until adulthood.

Until that July day in Hoppstadten, surrounded by family graves dating back to the sixteen hundreds and talking to my new friend Lissy Bamback, this was all that I knew about the handsome, elegantly dressed middle-aged man with graying brown hair, kindly eyes, whose portrait hangs in the front office of the I. Schiffman Building. I knew that he had religious training for I have his certificate of confirmation from the synagogue in Hoppstadten, which marks the completion of his religious education. I told Lissy that I have often wondered about the influences during his young life that molded his character and led during his adult life to his philanthropy and generosity toward his family and his communities, both Hoppstadten and Huntsville.

We returned to Lissy's home where she made several telephone calls. The calls led to two visits to Hoppstadten residents. First we went to see Lissy's 80 year-old great-aunt Luzia, whose childhood home was next door to Leo Schiffman's family, all of whom Cousin Leo brought to America during the 1930's.

Luzia's recollections of the Schiffman family were that her mother would exchange eggs for motza with Leo's mother, Lina, during Passover. I realized the family undoubtedly was observant and traditions were followed even though it must have been difficult to get motza in this small village away from the mainstream of Jewish life in the cities. Luzia also recalled that when Lissy's father was baptized, the rabbi at the synagogue down the street was praying so loud that his prayers could be heard along with the priest's. She added that Hoppstadten was actually the center of Jewish life for the surrounding towns because of the synagogue. She remarked that the mayor insisted that the entire community, both Jewish and Catholic, sweep and clean the streets just before the sabbath out of respect for the out-of-town people who would come to town for services. Of course, Aunt Luzia was curious about us and so we answered her questions with the help of Lissy who did our translating. Before we left Aunt Luzia gave us big hugs and a wonderful box of chocolates. We gave her our promise to return to Hoppstadten.

We then visited Mr. Karl Rumpel, an engineer by profession, who moved to Hoppstadten during the 1950's. Mr. Rumpel, a Catholic, is fascinated by the Hoppstadten Jewish community's history and has been researching the history of that community since his move to the town. We wondered what precipitated his interest. Mr. Rumpel explained that when he moved to Hoppstadten it was just after the last Jewish resident had died, a woman the town was able to save from the Nazis because she was married to a non-Jew. Mr. Rumpel was intrigued by the town's sense of loss, as if with Fannie Loc's death the village residents were reacting as though an entire community had been lost. Mr. Rumpel then began to research the Jewish community's history and today his bookshelves and files house a store of information sufficient to write a book, a project he hopes to achieve after he retires.

According to Mr. Rumpel, Jewish settlers first came to Hoppstadten during the sixteen hundreds. As boundaries shifted through the years, Hoppstadten, once part of France, became German. Through the centuries France's treatment of its Jewish community was more hospitable than Germany's, and even after Hoppstadten became part of Germany, that hospitality was continued by the local authorities so that Jews were allowed to farm and have stores when their co-religionists in nearby Frankfurt were living in ghettos. This was the reason that Hoppstadten, although a small town, had a proportionately high percentage of Jewish residents. In fact, the synagogue for the entire Burkenfeld region was located in Hoppstadten and remains there today, used now as an apartment house. I asked Mr. Rumpel how it had escaped destruction during Crystal Night, when synagogues were destroyed all over Germany. He said that the local non-Jewish community persuaded the Nazis to only break the windows and not burn the building.

Mr. Rumpel shared with us records of our family, when members emigrated to America, and also articles he had found about Isaac Schiffman. We learned that when Isaac returned to Hoppstadten around the turn of the century, the community had asked for his help to build a water system which he generously funded. During 1910, we learned from Mr. Rumpel that the German government forbade Jewish children from going to school with the Christian community. The Jewish community had no funds for

a building and according to Mr. Rumpel's research, the elders wrote, "to Isaac Schiffman, a successful businessman in America to ask for funds to build a Jewish school." Isaac sent the money, apparently just before he died, while he was quite sick. Now I began to better understand the influences that had molded the character of young Isaac and led to his accepting the responsibility to act as chairman of the building committee for Temple B'nai Sholom as well as his generosity towards family and community. These influences included having been surrounded by the sensitive caring larger community of Hoppstadten with tolerance for its co-religionists plus the exposure to religious devotion both within Isaac's family and within the local Hoppstadten Jewish community.

Today Mr. Rumpel lives by design three doors from the old synagogue. He feels a personal custodianship for the building. In fact, he had a local artist make an ink sketch of the synagogue as it once was, a copy of that original drawing he gave us when we said goodbye. He is proudest of the plaque that was recently presented to him by the regional Jewish community for his research and his commitment to the history of the Jewish community of Hoppstadten. The plaque indicates that a grove of trees were planted in Mr. Rumpel's honor in a forest in Israel, a country he hopes to visit one day after he has published his book on the Hoppstadten Jewish community.

Lissy then took us home for a late dinner with her family and showered us with wine and cakes for the long train ride back to Frankfurt. As we embraced and said good-bye at the train stop, I asked Lissy how I would find the Jewish cemetery if I returned to Hoppstadten and she no longer lived there. She smiled and pointed to the hill and said, "just look for the three pine trees."

The following is an excerpt from a letter I recently wrote to Lissy. It expresses what I feel and what the experiences of my trip to Hoppstadten meant to me.

*I received your loving letter and am happy to hear that you are pleased with the amulet with the three pine motif that I had made for you. At the time I first spoke to the artist, I thought of the symbolism of the*

*pine trees which mark the physical spot where you, our guide and our friend, joined Bobbie and me to our past and our roots. Our roots, like the roots of the three pines, give meaning to our lives and support us. Now you have embellished that image with still another metaphor—that of the fossilized ivory, the material from which the amulet is carved. In your last letter, you called my attention to the fact that the ivory belonged to a creature that lived on another continent, long ago. Similarly, in a symbolic way, you have brought Bobbie and me close to the lives of the people who are our ancestors who lived long ago on another continent. We have met your aunt who knew them and has shared stories with us of their lives. Mr. Rumpel knows and has shared with us their personal history and the history of their community. Through this process our Schiffman ancestors have become more vivid and alive than ever before and for this I thank you. Lissy, most importantly I am comforted now, that although there are no family members left in Hoppstadten to visit the cemetery, that the spirits of my ancestors hovering on a hillside on the edge of town guarded by three pines are in the loving hands of my friends.*

### **From the Files of Margaret Anne Goldsmith Hanaw**

**March 13, 1895**

*“The Specifications for the Building and Loan Offices Received”* The front on the Square will be built of stone, splendidly arched over the vestibuled entrance and the large window opening into the President’s office which will be in front. The Eustis Street side of the building will not be changed very much except four windows will be cut for the lower floor and stone casements will be placed in the others. The building will be a credit to the Association and an ornament to the East Side Square. The interior finish and furnishings will be the prettiest and most serviceable that can be purchased.



**April 5, 1901**

Isaac Schiffman acquired from J. Henry Landman and family Lot #52 beginning at the south side of the open alley and leading from Madison to Franklin as laid down in the Hartley Drayton map including the Landman & Co. warehouse.

According to an advertisement in our files dated 7/15/01 and a picture of a #750 American Beauty End-Spring Buggy, Isaac, still operating under the name of S. Schiffman & Co., advertised a new department added to his business operation "consisting of buggies, scurries, carriages of all kinds, wagons and harnesses to be shown at his warehouse on Franklin Street."

**February 26, 1904**

Isaac acquired from William J. Pulley & Co., of New York their warehouse located on Lot #51 adjacent to Lot #52, the property extended from Madison to Franklin. The Pulley Co. had been engaged in hardware business including wagons, buggies, and farm implements.

After Isaac's death, the family business then known as I. Schiffman Co., continued in the buggy business until the early teens, at which time a showroom and car repair shop were built for transition to the automobile business. During the 1960's, the automobile business was discontinued and the property rented for a drugstore and later a theater. The back lot was rented for parking. On August 28, 1967, the Housing Authority acquired the property by eminent domain for the construction of Constitution Hall Village.

**September 30, 1905**

The Southern Building and Loan Association (S.B. & L.A.) building located on the East Court Square was purchased for \$9,000. Some furnishings, such as the upright desk, predate 1895, when the building was sold to S.B. & L.A.



Isaac Schiffman—Born 1856, Hoppenstadten, Germany; Emmigrated to America, 1873; Died June 12, 1910, Huntsville, Alabama.



Solomon Schiffman



Schiffman Building, East Side Square



Interior views of the I. M. Heims Building, South Side Square  
(c. 1910).



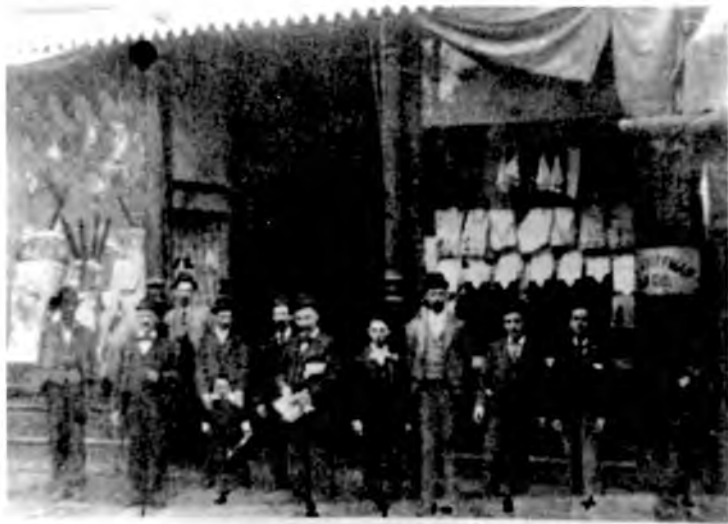


Further interior views of the I. Schiffman Building, South Side Square (c. 1990).





Franklin Street, Constitution Hall location as seen in 1819.



Old S. Schiffman & Co. Store, Huntsville, Alabama (about 1893). Persons identifiable are: Solomon Schiffman (1), Israel Schiffman (2), Leon Lehman (3), Ike Schiffman (4), Bob-Lee Schiffman (5), small boy, Sam Weil (6), Will Falk (8), Albert Jacoby (9), Sam L. Garner (10), Jessie C. Va.... (11), and John F. Smith (12)