

# Searching for Sheindel

by Judy Manelis

Sheindel Manelis died 109 years ago on October 9, 1907. According to family lore, she was killed by a horse and wagon in New Bedford, Massachusetts. That's where her family had settled after arriving in the United States from Russia. Had she lived, Sheindel would have been my aunt.

Over the years, when family members talked about our genealogical roots in "the old country" and the arrival of my grandparents in New Bedford, no one ever mentioned Sheindel—not my father, not my grandmother, no one. All I knew was that my father had arrived on a ship with his mother to reunite with my grandfather who had immigrated in 1902. My father's only sibling, my aunt Bee, was born in New Bedford.

Not until my cousin George created a Liss family tree did I learn about the existence of Sheindel Manelis. On the tree were Sara Liss Manelis and her husband, Zolman Manelis, my grandparents, and their children Louis (Lazer), my dad; Bee; and a Sheindel Manelis, who had a "d" after her name. The "d" I understood to mean deceased. When I questioned George, he identified Sheindel as my father's "other" sister and told me what he knew: Sheindel had been killed by a horse and wagon. He thought she was about 15 when she died.

The information surprised me. Why hadn't I heard about Sheindel before? Why didn't anyone mention her? After the

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initial surprise, I let the issue drop. To be honest, I wasn't all that interested in someone I never knew.

Over the years, I would occasionally think of Sheindel and the mystery of her untimely death. Did she really die at 15? Was it in New Bedford where I grew up or in Russia? And where was she buried? Was the story of the horse and wagon real or one of those family stories handed down through the generations that would prove false on closer examination? What did she look like? Were there any photographs of her?

In the summer of 2015, I went on Ancestry.com and looked up her name. Although I didn't find a Sheindel Manelis, I did find a Jennie Manelis who died in New Bedford on October 9, 1907. According to Ancestry, the information could be found in Massachusetts Death Records 1841–1915 or 1901–1980. The last name was right; the

timing seemed correct. But was Jennie the same as Sheindel? When I checked immigration records, there she was. It seemed that Sheindel, also known as Jennie, had made it to America. She had accompanied her brother Lazer and her mother Sara Manelis on the S.S. *Astoria*, arriving at Ellis Island on November 22, 1906. Their destination was listed as 371 Water Street in the South End of New Bedford. Her age on the ship's manifest was seven; my father was listed as age nine.

A week later, I visited my father's first cousin, Beverly, in Warwick, Rhode Island. Beverly remembered my grandmother talking with great sorrow about the loss of a daughter. She also repeated the same horse and wagon story, adding, "I think she died right in front of the house." As an afterthought, she noted that the family had not been in the United States very long. If, in fact, Sheindel arrived in the U.S. on November 22, 1906, she died only 10 months and nine days after her arrival. I could hardly imagine the sorrow that ensued that fall day.

I learned as a child that my grandmother had experienced 12 pregnancies and only two children had survived. Now I knew that three children had survived, but one of those, Sheindel, was killed. It was no wonder my grandmother called her last child, my Aunt Bee, Bubbe, the Yiddish word for grandmother. As my grandmother explained to me, she "wanted Bee to live a long life."

Beverly told me that her mother's Yiddish name was also Sheindel, but we all had called her Jennie. Bingo! The pieces all fit.

In early September 2015, I visited the office of the City Clerk in New Bedford and asked for a copy of Jennie's death certificate. When I received it, I found that Jennie/Sheindel was listed as nine years old at the time of her death. Nine? Seven? The exact age was unclear. The cause of death on the certificate read: internal injuries. Certainly consistent with an accident. Her place of burial: New Bedford.

My next stop was the local office of *The New Bedford Standard Times*, my childhood newspaper. *The New Bedford Standard*, founded in 1850, merged with the *New Bedford Times* in 1934. In 1907, it was called simply *The New Bedford Standard*. A *Times* receptionist directed me to the public library up the street. There the library archivist informed me that in 1907, there were actually three newspapers in town—morning, evening and afternoon—and said she would help me look for some mention of the tragedy that struck the local Jewish immigrant community that day in 1907.

After two hours of searching through hard-to-read microfilm, I had found nothing and was disappointed. The librar-

ian told me one newspaper was missing. On the other hand, maybe I had checked the wrong dates. Perhaps she was injured a week earlier and clung to life for several days after the accident. Or, maybe, I had just missed the reference. I decided to return to the library at some later date to look again. I also called the local hospital to see if they had any old records dating back to 1907, but was told they did not keep records for more than 50 years.

From the library, I drove to the one remaining synagogue in New Bedford, Tifereth Israel, the Conservative synagogue I had attended with my family when it was located on South Sixth Street, to see if there was any record of Sheindel's burial at the local Jewish cemetery.

The Jewish or Hebrew cemetery, as it was called in 1907, is located on Plainville Road in the North End of New Bedford. Tifereth Israel serves as its custodian. The secretary who maintains the list said she had no listing for Sheindel Manelis; however, the synagogue also had no record of my great-grandmother's burial. She (Hinda Liss) had died in 1936, and I had visited her grave at the Plainville Cemetery on more than one occasion. The records obviously were incomplete.

The secretary told me that Tifereth Israel had recently taken over the maintenance of the burials for the Orthodox synagogue, Ahavath Achim, which had closed in 2010 after almost 120 years in existence. Although its members also had been buried in the Plainville Cemetery, they had their own section. Perhaps she was there and had simply not been recorded.

My husband and I visited Plainville Cemetery several weeks later, walking up and down every row in the Ahavath Achim section, searching for the illusive stone that would mention Sheindel. Both of us are sufficiently literate in Hebrew and hoped our knowledge would enable us to recognize the gravestone. Unfortunately, we found nothing. There were some old graves whose letters and dates were impossible to read. Perhaps one of those was hers. We decided to return at another time and look again.

When I returned home to Boston, I went online and looked up the Center for Jewish Culture (CJC) at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth campus. From its records, I learned that, in 1907, New Bedford had two Jewish cemeteries. The older one, Peckham West, had closed in 1889. It had been used for early German Jewish residents of New Bedford and took up a small space in a larger public cemetery on Mount Pleasant Street. The land for the Hebrew cemetery on Plainville Road had been purchased in 1900, early enough for Sheindel to be buried there. But was she?

Could she have been buried in a public cemetery? The family was poor, my grandmother had recently arrived in the United States. My grandfather was struggling to make a living.

On the CRC website, I also found listings for three Orthodox synagogues in 1907, two in the North End of New Bedford and the Ahavath Achim on Howland Street in the



*Author's great-grandmother and Sheindel's paternal grandmother, Zissel Manelis. To her right are Lazar/Louis Manelis, and, author believes, Sheindel.*

South End of the city where my family lived. As my grandfather preceded my grandmother to the United States by five years, I assumed he would have connected with other Jewish immigrants who lived in New Bedford at that time, some of whom lived and worked in that part of the city.

By 1907, burials in the Hebrew cemetery would have been customary. In addition, Ahavath Achim had a spiritual leader, the dynamic Rabbi Hyman Papkin, the second rabbi in New Bedford, a Bible and Talmud scholar and one of the earliest adherents of religious Zionism.

I remembered Rabbi Papkin well. In the fall of 1952, 45 years after the death of Sheindel, I attended the funerals of my grandparents who died seven weeks apart. Rabbi Papkin, in his 70s at the time, delivered the eulogies in Yiddish. It was plausible that in his eulogies Rabbi Papkin mentioned the death of Sheindel so many decades earlier. Unfortunately, I did not understand Yiddish. I only knew that he was considered a great orator and, when he spoke, he elicited tears from his congregants. The same was true at the funerals of my grandparents. People in the congregation were crying.

One of the two synagogues in the North End, Chesed

Shel Emes (which had incorporated in 1893 with 23 members), survived until 1950. Ahavath Achim (established in 1893) had completed and formally dedicated its synagogue on Howland Street in 1899, several years before the arrival of my grandmother and her children in 1906. Both synagogues buried congregants in Plainville Cemetery. In addition, the Jewish fraternal organization, Workman's Circle, founded in 1900, had a small section there as well. These facts convinced me that, in spite of our failure to find her burial spot, Sheindel was buried somewhere in the Plainville Cemetery.

Looking further, I discovered the existence of a Hebrew Ladies Helping Hand organization, established in 1906, which provided sick and death benefits. Perhaps its records would provide me with some information on Sheindel's death in 1907.

During the ensuing months, with the onset of cold weather and two months in Tucson, Arizona, my research remained at a standstill. By spring, invigorated by the change in weather and my return home, I took up my search again. I decided to try the main branch of the Boston Public Library to view its collection of New Bedford newspapers. The available papers were limited. Again nothing.

Suddenly it was fall, October 2016, the month of Sheindel's death. This time, accompanied by my husband and determined to move my research forward, I made a reservation at a New Bedford-area hotel and planned two uninterrupted days of research.

We decided to start at the archive at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, located six miles from downtown New Bedford. Judith Farrar, the librarian responsible for the Jewish archives, pulled out every box and file that might shed some light on the early Jewish community. I examined material about Ahavath Achim and Chesed Shel Emet synagogues, the Workman's Circle, the Jewish cemeteries, the Hebrew Ladies Helping Hand, the Jewish history of New Bedford. Still nothing.

I did, however, find some useful and interesting information elsewhere in the archives. Ms. Farrar suggested I look at New Bedford city directories, which listed city residents and their occupations, as well as specific addresses and those who lived there. I examined books from 1902–11. Although I didn't find any reference to Sheindel, I did find information about my grandfather who was recorded as both Soleman and Zolman Manelis. I also discovered a number of addresses associated with him. Interestingly, my grandfather was not listed in any directory prior to 1907.

I knew my grandfather had been in New Bedford before 1907, and my grandmother had identified 371 Water Street on her travel documents, so I was surprised to find no reference to him at that address. I did find two Jewish family names listed at 371 South Water Street from 1904 to 1907, Shuster and Greenstein. I concluded that my grandfather had probably been a boarder, living with one of the families mentioned in the directories.

Residents of New York City's Lower East Side often

rented rooms to immigrant boarders in order to cover their rent. As my grandfather was in New Bedford on his own, he probably rented a room. In 1907, with his wife and children now in New Bedford, he had needed his own apartment. His first listing was at 15 Cannon Street in the 1907 directory.

I also discovered references to my grandfather's means of support. In 1907, it was listed simply as "rags"; in 1908, he was listed as "a sorter" and in 1909, "a peddler." I also found his brother David Manelis (who, I believe, accompanied my grandfather to America) and several addresses associated with the family after 1907. These were on Front Street, Acushnet Avenue and South Water Street (several locations).

From the archives building, my husband and I went to the university's general library to look at the microfilm collection of old newspapers. I was determined to go over whatever they had from the fall of 1907, even if it meant retracing my steps at the New Bedford and Boston Public Libraries. There we found the *New Bedford Morning Mercury*, the *New Bedford Times* and the *New Bedford Standard*. An additional newspaper, the *New Bedford Daily Mercury*, was missing. We gathered the boxes of microfilm relevant to my search and prepared to spend the afternoon and the next day, if necessary, going over each reel.

Randomly, I picked up the *New Bedford Morning Mercury* as our first reel. For about an hour we checked papers beginning on October 4. We were looking for an article on the accident or a simple obituary. At the same time I was thinking, "a small immigrant child, perhaps killed by horse and wagon—was that newsworthy in the New Bedford of 1907?" My husband, ever meticulous, rolled the microfilm slowly across the upper part of the pages, then the lower sections, and then the middle. Our eyes focused on the rolling history in front of us.

In our attempt to find a small obit or some reference to the accident, we almost missed the large article, that appeared at the top of page 2 in the October 10, 1907, edition of the *Morning Mercury*. As I looked at the top of the page, there, emblazoned across the top, was what I had been seeking. The headline read:

Under the Wheels of a Lumber Wagon  
Jennie Manelis, Nine Years Old,  
Crushed to Death while at Play on Cannon Street  
Mother Rushed to the Body and Her Cries  
Aroused the Neighborhood

I was stunned and totally unprepared to see the article devoted to the accident and to see the name Jennie Manelis in the headline. That headline and the article below were heart rending in their details. My grandmother had held Sheindel's body in her arms until she was pulled away. The scene couldn't have been more poignant. I could never have imagined this story as part of my grandmother's life. My grandmother, so warm, so loving, such a source of affection and acceptance of me when other aspects of my life were difficult. It pained me that she had undergone this tragedy.

# UNDER THE WHEELS OF A LUMBER WAGON

Newspaper article of Sheindel's accidental death

## Mother Dashed to the Body and Her Cry Aroused the Neighborhood.

Jennie Manelis, 5 years old, a pupil at the Thomas A. Greene school, was run over and instantly killed on Cannon street at dusk last night. The accident occurred directly in front of her home, 15 Cannon street, and her mother, frantic with grief, rushed from the house and clung to the body as it lay in the street.

Just how the accident occurred is not certain or there are three different versions. Arthur Disonette, a teamer employed by Mortimer McCarthy, reported to the police that his lumber team was bound west on Cannon street at 4:35 o'clock yesterday afternoon when a girl backed into one of the horses. The horse was startled, and the driver's attention was devoted to calming the animal. But the girl fell backward and was run over by his wagon.

Charles Rooks, a boy who was walking along the street near the Manelis house at the time, said that there were two lumber wagons on the way up the street, and that the Manelis girl started

to run between them, but struck the long board that extended from the rear truck and fell down, being covered by the wagon that was following.

"Jennie was playing school with Annie Diam," the Rooks boy said, "when they finished, the Manelis started to run across the street, and hit the front wagon."

Another story that the police heard was that the girl was riding on a lumber wagon ahead, and fell dropping under the feet of the horse that followed.

Mrs. Manelis created a scene in the street that attracted a crowd, and was some time before the body was removed from the street. Several doctors were summoned, but the child's skull was crushed and death was instantaneous.

The child's father, Zoleman Mane, has been a constant applicant for license as a junk collector or dealer, but his application has never been approved by the committee on license since the rule that applicants must be citizens has been enforced. There are two other young children in the family.

The family story handed down for 100-plus years was true. The writer had described the scene: It was dusk; Sheindel was playing outside. Witnesses offered different versions of the accident. One said she was crossing the street; another that she was running after the wagon. It didn't matter, she was dead, her death instantaneous. Beverly had been right; the accident occurred in front of the family's home on Cannon Street. I could hardly contain my own feelings of sorrow as I read how my grandmother, consumed by horror and grief, rushed into the street crying.

So ended day one of my research trip to New Bedford.

On the morning of day two, I called the New Bedford City Hall to see if they might have any additional information on Sheindel's death and burial. Maria Brilhante, a clerk in the department, informed me that death certificates issued by the department often lacked vital information that was included on the originals. She said she would go down to the City Hall vault to retrieve the original death certificate and promised to call me later in the day to let me know "one way or the other."

My husband and I spent our second morning in New Bedford driving to all the addresses that were listed in the city directories as important to my grandparents. I already knew that a major urban renewal project in New Bedford had wiped out most of South Water Street, making way for

the JFK Memorial Highway, including 1049 South Water, the address of my father's shoe store, where I had spent many hours as a child. The projected destination of Sara Manelis at 371 South Water Street was also gone, as were all the addresses I had noted on Water and Front Streets.

The last time I had visited South Water Street, I was shocked to see the once colorful and vibrant immigrant neighborhood I had known as a child, gone. Like Brigadoon, it had simply disappeared as if it never had existed at all. Manelis Shoes had been one of many immigrant-owned stores and businesses that had lined the street—shoes, dry goods, fruits and vegetables, meat—with Jewish and Portuguese names predominant. Part of New Bedford's rich history was gone forever.

I did find Cannon Street, where my family had lived, and Howland Street, where they had prayed, and I was surprised to see how close those streets were to the main part of town. From Cannon Street, I could see the New Bedford Whaling Museum located close by on Johnny Cake Hill.

Cannon and Howland Streets were each only a block long and no individual houses remained. They had been razed to build public housing. Some of the nearby streets had maintained the old housing, but those relevant to my life and my story were erased. The stark contrast between the old immigrant conclave of the early 20th century and the spare-looking housing project was jarring.

At lunch, the phone rang. It was Maria from the City Clerk's office to tell me she had the original death certificate in hand. She read from the certificate: Place of burial: Hebrew Cemetery. Date of burial: October 10th. It was official. Sheindel was somewhere in the Plainville Cemetery. She had been buried according to Jewish law, the day after her death. Another mystery solved.

That afternoon, my husband and I went back to Plainville Cemetery—again up and down, back and forth—still no luck. Very disappointing. After about two hours, freezing and discouraged, we retreated to the car and drove back to Boston, the exact location of Sheindel's burial still a mystery.

Several days later, I called the secretary at Tifereth Israel to express my frustration at not finding Sheindel's grave and to ask if she had any additional suggestions. This time the secretary asked if I had looked in the area just south of the Workmen's Circle section. It had many old graves, she said, with inscriptions all in Hebrew. No one had mentioned that section to me before. It appeared the hunt was not yet over. This new information would mean a third visit to Plainville Cemetery would be needed. Hopefully, I would find the final piece of the puzzle there.

In late November, my husband and I traveled to Plainville Cemetery for the third time. I decided this would be the last time I would look for Sheindel's grave. I knew she was there, but where? I had already said *kaddish* for her for two years, acknowledging the date of her death, but the location of the grave was another story. We found the section referred to by the synagogue secretary, but again nothing. To make sure we didn't miss Sheindel's resting place,

we again examined all early gravesites. Perhaps the original tombstone had been broken and discarded. There were several grassy areas in the old sections of the cemetery that had no stones. Perhaps she was there, or one of the impossible-to-read tombstones was hers. I was hoping for a miracle like the one in the library when I came across the article on the accident. But it was not to be. Reluctantly, we left the cemetery resigned to the fact that I would never know the exact location of Sheindel's burial. As I left the cemetery, I stopped by my grandparents' graves and placed small stones on them, acknowledging my visit. I told my grandmother how sorry I was for my failure to find Sheindel's grave.

Little did I know there were more facts to uncover that would be equally shocking. On my return home, I wrote to my cousin George about my visit and the newspaper article I had found. He questioned me about the date of Bee's birth and how the date might impact my story in some way. Reluctantly, I checked JewishGen. What I found was devastating. My Aunt Bee was born on November 22, 1907, only 44 days after Sheindel died, and on the one-year anniversary of my grandmother's arrival in the United States. In other words, my grandmother was pregnant at the time of the tragedy. I was stunned. Each piece of information had increased the tragic circumstances surrounding Sheindel's death.

As I contemplated the story of Sheindel, what happened to her and my grandmother's sorrow, I realized that Sheindel's death shed some light on my personal history. Traditionally, Jews of Eastern European ancestry name their children after a family member who has died, to honor them and to perpetuate family names. In my own family, I was

given a Yiddish name at birth. It was Hinda Zissel, the names of my father's grandmothers. My brother, Richard, was Reuven Shalom after my mother's mother, Sarah Rebecca, and his English name was Richard after Rebecca. But what about my English name, Judith Ann? When I asked who I was named after, my mother told me that Ann stood for Hinda, but she never told me why she had picked Judith. What she did say was that she was trying to decide between Rebecca (obviously my grandmother) and Judith and she had chosen Judith. But why?

The name Jennie, begins with a J, like Judith. My brother was R like Rebecca. Could it be that I was named after Sheindel, otherwise known as Jennie? The tragic nature of Sheindel's death at such a young age may have been the reason my mother never told me the origin of my name. But I am convinced Judith was meant to honor Jennie/Sheindel, the aunt I never knew, the young immigrant who arrived in New Bedford to start a new life, only to die in a tragic accident less than a year after she reached her new home. I believe my own family tradition points to this interpretation. So, at the end of my journey searching for Sheindel, I found myself.

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