

## [Herman Kirschbaum]

Beliefs and Customs - Folk Stuff

FOLKLORE

New York Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A 10 Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER B. Hathaway

ADDRESS 356 West 123rd Street, NYC

DATE January 12, 1939

SUBJECT FOLKLORE— UNION SQUARE (KIRSCHBAUM)

1. Date and time of interview Originally September, 1938. Supplemented by others since.
2. Place of interview Union Square
3. Name and address of informant Herman Kirschbaum
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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Same as in Jacob Stein and Panhandling In addition— Beneath the tall equestrian statue of George Washington, at the South entrance of the Park, whose worn granite base in times past has afforded a resting place for innumerable of the City's unemployed, on a warm night last summer, some twenty or thirty persons, literally from the ends of the earth, sat and stood in attitudes of ease, listening to tales of far places.

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One of the group was from old Budapest, astride the Danube. In him, however, was none of the romance and story that one might expect from a native of the ancient capital of the Magyars. He had taken no roots in the soil, reflected no color of the place of his origin. Himself not a Magyar, he was of that tribe of wanderers that have stemmed from Asia, the birthplace of man, since the dawn civilization. He was a cosmopolitan. A wanderer, reflecting nothing of his origin.

And now, in distant Union Square he sat as casually “popping off,” in broken English, about the cost of living and other trivia, as ever his parents had done in the land of Francis Joseph.

A Roumanian from the Black Sea was telling of the Gypsies of the Dobruja, or Delta of the Danube, with whom he had once lived, or said he had. More recently he was Constantinople. He was one who saw life and color in all about.

Of the round, full-orbed moon just clearing the tip of the Consolidated Gas Company, on Fourteenth Street, he spoke with feeling, saying it was like the Turkish moon of old Stamboul when it bathed the Golden Horn.

The hour was late. The group had talked for hours. The illuminated clock atop the Consolidated Gas marked an hour long past midnight.

The city slept. Or as nearly as it ever does, when the rumble of the early milk wagon mingles its threnody with that of the retiring traffic of the day. 3 The soft September moon

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wove its magic spell over the little park. Each shrub and bush and tree took on fantastic shapes and forms. The statue of Lincoln and Lafayette, a little farther off, were ghostly figures. The hundred-foot flagpole in the center was a Jacob's ladder to the Tower of Babel.

Serenely down upon the fed and the unfed, the housed and unhoused, shone the effulgent rays, as if there were no such things as human miseries.

The notched skyline around the Park looked more jagged than ever against the background of silver, a jagged reproduction of the Sierra Nevadas in the center of Manhattan.

Here and there, on the spacious benches, reposed, in sleeping attitudes, the army of the unemployed — or some of it — whose status of “transient relief,” entitled them only to breadline meals at South Ferry or Twenty-ninth Street.

Here they were sleeping the night out rent free. The big roomy benches, set in solid concrete, were new and commodious and had no cross bars to torture the troubled sleeper.

Full length they sprawled. They slept. Profoundly. Nor dreamed of palaces nor golden strands.....

That is, until a police wagon sneaked silently up to the Southwest entrance to the Park and snaked off, by ones and twos, some half dozen of the bivouacked sleepers. Smack into the wagon they were chucked, still half asleep. The rest were scattered down Fourth Avenue and on rolled the Black Maria for other worlds to conquer. 4 The poachers of sleep could rest that night in police cells.

And beneath the statue of Washington the talk drone on.

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Mostly it was of the standard of living in the different countries from which hailed the respective raconteurs. All, however, were one in the belief that the standard here was higher than anywhere else; the institutions freer, even with its Union Square.

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER B. Hathaway

ADDRESS 356 West 123rd Street, NYC

DATE January 12, 1939

SUBJECT FOLKLORE - UNION SQUARE

1. Ancestry Russo-Jewish
2. Place and date of birth A small town near Libau, Province of Courland, old Russia, in 1896. Courland is now the independent state of Latvia.
3. Family No relatives in this country. Parents and one brother now living near Antwerp, Belgium.
4. Places lived in, with dates In his native village until 15 years of age. Wandered in Berlin, Belgium and London about one year. Arrived in New York in 1912, where he has lived almost continuously since.

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5. Education, with dates Formal education in the German private schools of Courland. What would correspond to grammar schools here, 1902-1911.

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates

Worked in the fur business since about 1913 or '14, where he was engaged in the manufacturing end of the business. Worked there until the depression ended his employment.

7. Special skills and interests

8. Community and religious activities

Atheistic and radical in philosophy.

9. Description of informant Tall, stooped, even gaunt, the forty-two-year-old informant was almost as attenuated as an interrogation point and about the same shape. Well-dressed for Union Square, from his upper lip dangled (See page 2)

10. Other Points gained in interview

On Home Relief. Member of W. A. 2 a perpetual cigarette that jiggled up and down as he talked. He was courteous, suave, soft spoken, a ready grin greeting the most savage jibe in return. I never saw him other than poised, considerate and impersonal.

Argues continually about Marx. Never questions the eternal rightness of his patron saint, but does it with a regard for the other fellow that is exceptional in Union Square.

His mental attitude might be accounted for by his size. He couldn't hope to put up much physical resistance to the plug-uglies that sometimes invade the Square. Or it might come from the mixing of his parents with the "big gentiles" (see Form C), in old Russia, that

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resulted in a broader, more cosmopolitan point of view than that possessed by his fellow emigres.

I think, however, it was merely the fact — from whatever cause — that he saw the humerous side of the world about him.

Fanaticism does not jibe with humor, or the trait that sees the incongruities of life. The fanatic is usually in such deadly earnest that he can't see himself. The fanatic is not an analyst. He is a motive man. He organizes and moves society. That is his job. He is least of all concerned with the why.

Any humor he may possess cribs and counteracts his motive power and makes him less the fanatic. At heart a humorist could not be a crusader. He is not narrow-gauged enough. He might be in a crusade, but he could not motivate one.

Thus our informant had his crusading spirit tempered by a humorous insight into human weaknesses that lent greatly to the reasonableness 3 of what he said.

He had not a trace of that “to-hell-with-everything” attitude, “the more-misery-in-life-the-better,” on the theory that the worse things are, the quicker will come his particular brand of reform. Instead, he sanely recognized that the world will go just as fast as the people are capable of going and no faster; that trying to pour things into people with a funnel is not only wrong sociology, but wrong pedagogy.

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

## Library of Congress

NAME OF WORKER B. Hathaway

ADDRESS 356 West 123rd Street, NYC

DATE January 12, 1939

SUBJECT FOLKLORE - UNION SQUARE

At the base of the Statue the group of all-nighters had arrived at the standard of living in old Russia.

Professor So-an'-so, according to Budapest, was a "tight wad." Even here, in free America, he would spend no more than five cents for a cigar. And he had no excuse for it. He was well to do.

"Why should I?" he was quoted as saying. "Pouff!" The speaker made an expressive motion with his hand in the air. "Just like that!" the Professor would say .....

"That's smoke. Why should I spend money for that? It is gone. Nothing remains. You have nothing to show for it. Why should I spend more than five cents for nothing?"

The man from Budapest gave it as his opinion that nearly all those from poor sections of Europe, like Hungary and pre-war Russia, were too miserly to appreciate the higher standard of living here, or were afraid to spend.

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They were too stingy. They were afraid to risk five cents for a smoke. They were not used to it. The old standard of living still gripped them here in the new world.

That started the informant.

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Alert he stood, hooked like a question mark in the soft light of the moon, that lent an air of unreality to the tale he told of how he came to Union Square.

Without a trace of pride and the stamp of utter sincerity, he said—

----- Herman Kirschbaum

Mein fader was in Courland like a rich man here. He had great acres of land — hundreds of acres. He traded in land and became very rich. He was like bourgeoisie here. Petty bourgeois.

He had the biggest house in town. That was in Courland, in old Russia. In a little town near Libau.

When he came home at night, I remember, mein fader would have in his buggy champagne and meat and every kind of food. Champagne didn't cost there like here.

It only took eight hours by train to go to France. And when mein fader would go there, he would bring back with him anything he liked — champagne and all kinds of drinks. In my home champagne was like water. Nobody thought anything of it.

3

We always had plenty of everything. I never knew what it was to go without anything I wanted. Mein fader was in with all the big gentiles and traded with them.

He was Jewish, but not very orthodox and everybody liked him. He always made plenty of money. Naturally he was up to everything that was going on in business and cashed in on it.

But for all that (with a deprecating wave of the hand), I didn't like it. I never did like it. My home was too strict. Not enough freedom. For me, anyway.

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Everything had to be just so. That was the way the gentiles did. So that's the way we had to do. Mein fader had, what you call—Social standing. And lived up to it. He wanted the good opinion of his neighbors.

If I went out with a girl, mein fader said people were talking about me. As if I gave a damn what they said? But the folks cared and I was blamed for it.

If I took a little too much drink, the folks complained. The gentiles didn't do that way. The gentiles did this and the gentiles did that. It got on my nerves. It was too cramped there.

So when I was fifteen I ran away from home.

From mein fader's desk, in the big front room, I took some money and ran away. I took a good deal. Plenty. Enough to last a long time. An' I ran away.

I had no passport, but in Europe with money you can do anything. I bought one. I went to Belgium. Conditions were freer there. Before that I was in Berlin a while. But always I was looking toward England. In Belgium I stayed a while and then got a boat out to London.

I had no trade. I didn't know how to do any work. A rich man's son doesn't learn a trade. I didn't even know the language. But I had some money an' that's what carried me through.

Well, in London I met an English Jew. He told me that America was the place. At home in Courland I had always heard that America was no good. A place of gangsters and lawlessness. Only bad people went there. And it was the same way in England. They all cried down America. In fact, all over Europe everybody believed America was a bad place.

But this English Jew wasn't fooled. He knew. And he put me wise. He knew, what you call — Onions. He knew his onions. I couldn't talk English, but we got along together in Yiddish.

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America's the place, he told me. You have no trade. There you can learn a trade. At that time no Jew could learn a trade in London. And all over Europe it was the same way. Before the war no Jew could learn a trade.

He was either mercantile — such as shoestring peddler, or sometimes the gentiles would allow him to have a bigger business. Whenever it was to their interests. But he was not in the trades.

It's all different now. But before the war, with only rare exceptions, a Jew could not learn a trade.

So this London Jew said to me, suppose we go in together. You help me an' I'll help you. You got money, you can't talk English. I ain't got enough money, but I know the ropes. I wanta go to America too. You help me with the money an' I'll get the passports and arrange everything.

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Well, I paid for the tickets an' we landed in New York. That was in 1912. Prices were very low then. I still had a little money left. For fifteen cents you could buy a whole meal. I'll never forget those meals!

I walked into a restaurant on Rivington Street. It was the corner of Eldridge, I remember it as well as yesterday. I should drop down dead if I didn't for fifteen cents buy a four or five-course meal!

I had soup — a big meat order, and good! — desert — and then tea, coffee or milk. And on top o' that, they gave you a big soda order — you know, at the soda fountain — if you wanted it. Free, mind you. And if you gave the waiter a nickel tip once a week, he was your friend for life. He would give you the best in the house. To a waiter a nickel was a lotta money in them days.

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Believe me, when I walked outa that restaurant, I felt as if I had eaten something! I thought New York was the best city in the world. I still do. I went to that restaurant, regular, for a long time.

At that time six dollers a week was good wages. If a man got eighteen, he was a prince. That was in 1912, as I say, when I first landed here. I was sixteen years old. But if I live a million years I'll never forget those old days on Rivington Street!

At that time that section was the old Ghetto — that is around in Seward Park, a little farther down. There was plenty Jews there. I thought I had never seen so many Jews! As a matter of fact, I never had. And friendly!.....

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New York was a wonder city. Everything was cheap and I still had a little money. Less than fifty dollars, to be exact, but I was a prince while it lasted.

My friend, the London Jew, had friends in Boston and he went there shortly after and I sort o' lost track of him. Later I heard from him on the Pacific Coast, where he enlisted for the war in Europe. Still later, I heard that he was killed in France.

Poor fellow, I guess the Argonne got 'im. I never heard of him after .....

Well, my money didn't last forever. I had to go to work. I had no trade. One day I began selling shoelaces on Broadway. Below Fourteenth Street. Fourteenth Street then was the main crosstown thoroughfare and Broadway was a small section. Or it seemed so to me.

A little later I got a chance to learn the fur business and jumped at it.

In New York today, as you may know, the fur business is entirely in the hands of Jews. That wasn't the case in 1912 and '18. In that day the Jews were not in the fur business at

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all. They didn't know anything about it. Before the war the fur business here was handled entirely by the French.

That may seem strange today. But that was the situation. In that day you didn't see furs on every shop girl, as you do now. Cheap furs didn't exist. They were very expensive. And only the rich could afford them. A good set of furs ran into the thousands of dollars.

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And no manufacturing was done here. Furs all came from Paris. And that was true not only for America. The French at that time did the fur business for most of Europe.

For instance, if a New York purchaser wanted furs he gave an order to Macy's, or some of the department stores, and they were ordered from Paris. Stores here were order houses on Paris. No manufacturing was done here until the close of the war. The war brought about the change. It broke the French fur monopoly.

Toward the close, when the war began to absorb all the industrial energy of France, some French Jews, who knew the fur business, came here and started manufacturing furs on a small scale.

From that kind of a start came the huge industry we know today. And all in a few years. Just before the depression, the fur industry in the metropolitan area alone was estimated at a billion dollar a year turnover. That is, total — the clothing, the dyeing and the assembling branches.

Those figures are from the Ladies' Garment Worker. But I think they are correct. I was in the manufacturing, or assembling branch of the industry. That is, the putting together of the furs and the cloth into the finished garment.

Well, inside of two years I was getting fifty or sixty dollars a week. I was sitting pretty. From shoestrings to half a hundred per — pretty good, eh? It went a little to my head.

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It was the war that did the trick. The war created a demand for American products. Up jumped prices. And up jumped wages. There 8 were no more fifteen cent meals on Rivington Street. They were charging fortyfive and fifty cents for the same thing now.

I moved up to Riverside Drive and went in for culture.

I wore expensive clothes, smoked high priced cigars, paid four prices for food. And if that ain't culture—

But, as I say, the depression came. Everything has a catch in it.

Now I'm on relief.....

Yes, my parents are still living. In a little town near Ahnt verp, in Belgium. In the war they lost everything and finally escaped into Belgium. That was during the Menshevik regime of Alexander Kerensky. Just before the Bolsheviks came in.

My oldest brother has a little business in Ahnt verp, or near it, rather. My father and mother live with him. They are very old and living is cheap there. Now and then I send them ten dollars. They can live a week, both of them, on that in Ahnt verp ....

(He straightened up, pulled in his belt)

An' that, gentlemen (flipping a burnt-out cigarette over the railing), is how I happened to be in Union Square, on the bright summer night of September 19, 1938 — or the 20th rather (with a glance at the 9 clock, now pointing to three) — and enjoying the hospitality of Uncle Sam, of whom I had never even heard in my Courland home; instead of lingering there, like a barnacle still, in a village near the present city of Libau.

I am not there. I am here .....

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An' that's why.