

Glimpses Into American Jewish History Part 23

Louis Raskas of St. Louis (1888 – 1974)

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It is well-known that in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries America was called the *treifa medina* by many religious Jews living in Eastern Europe. This was based on the fact that the religious observance of many of the Jews who immigrated to the United States during this time period eroded as a result of them coming into contact with the environment in America. Even if parents managed to maintain their commitment to Torah and Mitzvos, more often than not their children did not follow in their footsteps. Nonetheless, there were families in which the immigrants and their descendants remained Orthodox. One such family is the Raskas family of St. Louis, Missouri.

Some readers may recognize the name Raskas, because it has been associated with the dairy industry for many years. “Raskas Foods has been in business since 1888. The Raskas Dairy Company first began its door-to-door delivery of milk in St. Louis by horse-drawn wagons. With the advent of pasteurization, Raskas developed into a general dairy.”¹

In 1882 Sholom Yitzchok [Isaac] and [Shifra] Rivka Raskas immigrated from Kovno, Lithuania, to St. Louis to join members of Mrs. Raskas’s Sarasohn family. They lived about ten blocks from the Mississippi River where the Jewish Community was located at that time. Isaac started selling milk to the neighbors much like Tevye did in Fiddler on the Roof. After the turn of the century the family moved to 1313 North Newstead, which at that time was still a semi-rural area on the western fringe of the St. Louis population. There they began a small dairy. Milk was obtained from cows that grazed on farmland at Union Avenue and Natural Bridge Road, later the site for decades of a huge General Motors assembly plant.

The Raskases were sincerely committed Orthodox Jews. Pictures of their parents available at <http://www.ajlegacy.org/history.asp> show that they both came from learned, Litvishe families. The Raskases had eight children, four boys and four girls. Knowing that their oldest two sons, Yudel (Julius) and Louis (Chaim Shabatsai Lev) could not receive an intensive Torah education in St. Louis, they sent Yudel and Louis to study in the famed Slabodka Yeshiva located near Kovno, Lithuania. Louis was all of 12 years old at the time! Given his tender age, he was sent to live with relatives.

One cannot help but marvel at the Raskases depth of commitment to their sons' yeshiva education. (The well-known American Jewish historian Jacob Rader Marcus told a grandson of Louis that the Raskas boys were probably the first young men to be sent from the United States to Europe to study in a European yeshiva!)

One should keep in mind that in 1900 travel to Europe took weeks. Furthermore, there probably were no telephone communications between Kovno and St. Louis. The only method of communication was by mail, which was very slow. Sending one's sons to Europe to learn meant not seeing them for years. Nonetheless, Isaac and Rivka Raskas were willing to and did make these sacrifices so that their sons would grow up to be observant, Torah educated Jews. Indeed, they did not see their sons until 1906, when they returned home for a visit. After this visit, their sons again returned to Europe to continue their yeshiva studies.

After spending several years studying in Slabodka, Louis decided to continue his studies in the Chafetz Chaim's yeshiva in Radin. While he studied in Radin, he was known as "der Amerikaner." It was in Radin that Louis met and married Ruth Poupko. He supported his family by qualifying as a pharmacist and opening a small drugstore.

In the early part of 1914 Yudel and Louis received a letter telling them that their father and mother wanted to visit Eretz Yisroel. (The senior Raskases had purchased some land in Petach Tikva and did eventually settle in Eretz Yisroel with their four youngest children.) Isaac asked the boys to return to St. Louis and take care of his dairy business during his planned visit. Yudel and Louis returned in the late spring of 1914.

"Louis left Ruth and their two small children in Radin, intending to return to them soon, but World War I made that impossible. Throughout the war he tried to get them out, but in vain. The town of Radin was caught in the maelstrom of bloody fighting on the German-Russian front, and civilians living there suffered grievously, sometimes under German control, sometimes under Russian control, as fierce fighting raged back and forth."

"Because the head of the family was an American citizen - Louis, after all, had been born in St. Louis - both Russian and German authorities extended to the Raskas family some very welcome amenities. Throughout the war, for instance, Raskas was able to send his wife money through the American ministry in Warsaw, and thus she and her children lived in 'comparative comfort,' as she later put it, compared with the abject poverty of the surrounding Polish population. Nevertheless, life for them there was extremely trying."²

When World War I ended in 1918, Louis and Ruth found themselves in a quandary. He could not leave St. Louis, because he was running his father's dairy business. She, however, did not want to leave her parents and her family to

come to a foreign country. Still, she loved her husband very much and wanted to be reunited with him.

“It was suggested to her that she see her uncle, the Rabbi of the neighboring village of Aisheshuk (Lithuania-Eiszyszki), who was known for his scholarship, his wisdom, and his good judgment. After a lengthy conversation he told her, ‘You must now make a decision. Either stay here and get a divorce from your husband or join him.’ She decided to come to America to unite the family. Her uncle supported her decision. Had she remained, she and her family would have been destroyed in the Holocaust, for there were no survivors of the Radun Massacre.”³

In April, 1920 Mrs. Raskas and her two children, Berenice, 10, and Ralph, 8, finally arrived in St. Louis. Louis and Ruth became pillars of the St. Louis Jewish community. They were well-known for their strict adherence to Torah and Mitzvos. From 1929 – 1930 Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, came to America and visited many Jewish communities throughout the country. While in St. Louis, it was Ruth Raskas who prepared the food that he ate.

Louis developed and expanded what had been his father’s small dairy business. “Under his leadership and acumen - and with his wife working side by side with him – [they] developed the company into one of the nation's leading dairy concerns. Although he marketed for the broad public, Raskas took great care that all phases of milk processing met strict standards of kashrut.”⁴ Indeed, the Raskas dairy operation may well have been the first in the United States to produce *Cholov Yisroel* milk.

Mr. and Mrs. Raskas developed a type of sour cream that they labeled “Smetina.” Eventually they gave up the milk business and concentrated on the manufacture of Smetina, cream cheese and other soft cheese products. The business eventually expanded into national and international markets, becoming a most successful food conglomerate.

[Louis] Raskas's impact upon the St. Louis Jewish community was much more than his success as a dairy entrepreneur. Ardently interested in Jewish education, he became actively involved with the Associated Hebrew Schools, the local Yeshiva Zechariah Joseph, and the establishment of the Rabbi H. F. Epstein Hebrew Academy. He generously supported the Jewish Hospital and other philanthropic activities of the Jewish Federation.

Raskas was an avid Zionist and was particularly active in the St. Louis Mizrachi organization, and, after Israel was established in 1948, in innumerable State of Israel bond campaigns. Many knew him as a humanitarian especially helpful to European refugees, undoubtedly

recalling his family's earlier hardships in Poland. He had a reputation also in the international Jewish community as a generous supporter of institutions of higher [Torah] learning all over the world and especially in Israel.

Raskas contributed positively also to many areas of the non-Jewish community. He was president of the national Dairyman's Association, where his impact was felt in the industry throughout the country. His name could be found among contributors to many St. Louis community programs, especially those engaged in helping needy families. He served as an honorary colonel on the staff of Governor John M. Dalton of Missouri. He died on April 20, 1974, and was buried in Jerusalem. St. Louis newspapers used a very simple but most appropriate term in eulogizing him: "Orthodox Community Leader."⁵

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¹ <http://www.zoominfo.com/search/CompanyDetail.aspx?CompanyID=32145674&cs=QEB6oEKyA>

² Zion in the Valley, The Jewish Community of St. Louis, Volume II, The Twentieth Century, by **Walter Ehrlich, University of Missouri Press, 2002**, page 123.

³ **As A Brand Plucked From the Fire**, by Bernard S. Raskas, communicated to the author by the late Walter Ehrlich.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., page 124.