



*Priestly blessing symbol on a Cohen gravestone
at Ballybough Cemetery, Dublin*

The Pencil Cohens of Dublin

www.historyeye.ie

Few families have the distinction of being called after the product they make. The Cohens of Dublin were a notable exception. Proverbially known as the “Pencil Cohens”, this family of Ashkenazi Jews made their mark on Ireland by being the first to introduce the country to the simple wonder of the graphite pencil in the late 18th century.

They were sons of Rosetta and Solomon Cohen from Lissa (Leszno) in the Prussian region of Posen.¹ Lissa’s Jewish community dated back to the sixteenth century² and was one of the largest in Poland by the mid 1700s, producing several prominent rabbis. It is thought that Solomon and Rosetta Cohen came to Dublin in the 1770s via London.³ Their migration from Leszno may have been prompted by the catastrophic fire of 1767 which destroyed the entire Jewish district there.⁴

¹Louis Hyman, *The Jews of Ireland from earliest times to the year 1910*, page 90-91.

²Yivo Encyclopaedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Leszno

³ Ibid.

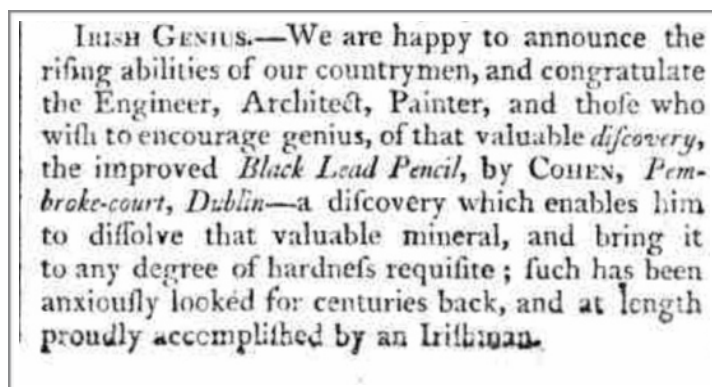
⁴ Virtual Shtetl, <http://www.sztetl.org.pl/en/article/leszno/5,history/>. Accessed April 2015.

Two of the older Pencil Cohen children were born in and around this time and may possibly have been born in Lissa.

Solomon and Rosetta were bucking the trend when they arrived in Ireland in the 1770s. The Jewish population of Dublin was in serious decline at this time. The *Irish Naturalisation Act* of 1783 , which expressly excluded Jews from citizenship in Ireland , did nothing to help the situation. There is no record of what business Solomon Cohen was involved in when he came to Dublin, but it is probable that he had something to do with the trade in pencils that made his sons well known. A number of Cohens were already established in London in pencil manufacture and it is likely that they were closely connected if not directly related to the Pencil Cohens of Dublin. For instance there was a Solomon Cohen, pencil-maker, operating in St. Paul's, Shadwell in the 1770s.⁵ And a Sol or Saul Cohen, pencil maker, at 42 Great Prescott Street, London, 1839 ⁶ was an executor in the will left by one of the Dublin Pencil Cohens, Abraham, in 1854.

London was a natural home for pencil makers. The graphite manufacture and sale was controlled by the crown. Graphite was mined in Cumbria at the Grey Knotts mine (the only known source) and sold at the markets in London.⁷ Graphite was the original 'black gold' and when supplies became scarce from over-mining its export was banned and prices became high.

18th century pencil making was a laborious, unmechanised process that had most in common with woodwork and joinery. The square groove housing the lead had to be cut from pieces of wood by hand. In the 1806 edition of *Gentleman's Almanack*, a Bernard or Barnaby Cohen, pencil maker, operated out of 5 Pembroke Court, a now defunct street located off Castle Street, Dublin. By 1815 he had moved to 8 Charlemont Bridge, (now Ranelagh Road) and had been joined in business by a J Cohen (probably Bernard's brother, Jacob who died in the early 1830s.)



Dublin Evening Post, 6 September 1808
hails a great new discovery

⁵ *Exeter Working Papers in Book History*, "Exeter Working Papers in British Book Trade History; 0 The London book trades 1775-1800: a preliminary checklist of members" . <http://bookhistory.blogspot.ie/2007/01/london-1775-1800-c.html>. Accessed Mar 3, 2015.

⁶ Tony Abrahams, *Midlands Historical Data collection of Trade Directories*, via ancestry.co.uk. Accessed April 2015. Sol Campbell of Great Prescott Street was born in 1777. Died 1864. His son was Abraham, a stockbroker.

⁷ <http://bleistift.memmm.de/?s=cohen>. Accessed 01/04/2015.

Newspaper ads dating from 1808 show that the Pencil Cohens were innovating with technology and had found a way to dissolve graphite and bring it to “any degree of hardness” : a technique that had been “anxiously looked for centuries back.” It is noteworthy that the papers took pride in the Irishness of the inventors, indicating that the Pencil Cohens were viewed as the city’s own by this time.

By the early 1800s the Cohens were thought to be the oldest Jewish family in Dublin. Along with the Phillips family, they were certainly the only orthodox Jews left in the city. Most of the congregation had left for London because of lack of opportunity in a depressed economy. The old synagogue at Marlborough Green in the north inner city had already closed by 1790 and much of its treasures had to be sold off to pay outstanding debts.

In 1816 the *Irish Naturalisation Act* of 1783 was repealed. This helped to reverse the decline in the Jewish population of Dublin. Six years later a new synagogue opened at 40 Stafford Street, now Wolfe Tone Street, parish of St Mary’s. The Pencil Cohens played a central part in its revival. It was they who presented the new congregation with two Scrolls of the Law which had originally been used by the 18th century worshippers at Marlborough Green.⁸

These scrolls (the Siphrei Torah) had some adventures in the preceding years, according to Louis Hyman’s book, *The Jews of Ireland from earliest times to the year 1910*. Having been sold to pay off the debts of the Marlborough Green synagogue, they came into the hands of Sarah Saunders of Fishamble Street. Leaders at the Bevis Marks Synagogue in London, regarded as the mother synagogue of the Dublin congregation, were keen to have them returned. But the Cohen brothers had other ideas. According to Hyman’s account, they pursued Saunders onto the boat she had boarded for the trip to London and stole them back.



8 and 9 Ranelagh Road, Dublin , originally Charlemont Street Upper or Charlemont Bridge. Manufactory and residence of the Cohen Brothers' pencil business in the 19th century.

⁸ Louis Hyman, *The Jews of Ireland from earliest times to the year 1910*, page 93.

The Cohens' pencils were apparently made at the manufactory at Charlemont Street or Bridge, Ranelagh and distributed through retailers such as Grant and Bolton of Grafton Street. They cost on average half a penny each.⁹ Drawing pencils cost more and were sold in packs of half a dozen.

Many of the Cohen's colleagues in the London pencil trade merged with manufacturers such as Staedtler and became part of the household names in pencil brands. This didn't seem to happen in the case of the Pencil Cohens of Dublin, although a Cohen pencil maker in London founded Arthur Johnson in 1803, which later merged with E. Wolff and Sons to become Royal Sovereign Pencil Co. in 1920.

According to legend, Abraham Cohen was a true eccentric, living in a squalid state in Ranelagh with old newspapers for bed linen.¹⁰ In fact "Pencil" Cohen wasn't his only nickname. He was also known as "miser" Cohen.

GENUINE PENCILS.

B. AND A. COHEN

RESPECTFULLY apprise the Public that a quantity of *spurious Pencils*, bearing the name or a similar name, have been selling in Dublin and elsewhere to their detriment, from the quality of the above firm's manufacture. They caution the Public against such fraud. From the moderate prices they solicit public support. Their Pencils are to be had of Messrs. Grant and Bolton, 115, Grafton-street, and at the Manufactory, No. 8, CHARLEMONT-BRIDGE.

Best Drawing Pencils, 4s. 6d. and 2s. 6d. per doz.
Ditto Office ditto, 4s. to 2s. and 1s. per doz.
N. B.—All orders to be pre-paid.

Freeman's Journal, 25 Feb 1843.
Courtesy of British Newspaper Archive

⁹Louis Hyman, *The Jews of Ireland from earliest times to the year 1910*, page 91.

¹⁰ Stuart Rosenblatt, *Rosenblatt Jewish Ireland Series: Hetitage*, Vol XV, 2008. Page 868.

By 1840, Jacob Cohen had died and Barnaby and Abraham were now in business together at the same address. Barnaby married late in life and had a son, Samuel (1834-1879)¹¹. Nothing could be found out about this son except for the fact of his burial at Ballybough graveyard. In 1866 the newspapers reported the sale of the furniture of a house at Great Brunswick Street belonging to a Samuel Cohen who was leaving town to live on the Continent.¹² It is not known whether this individual was Barnaby's son.



Watercolour of scene near Borrowdale Grey Knotts mine by artist John Warwick Smith (1749-1831) . The Pencil Cohens sourced the graphite for their pencils here.

Abraham continued on with the business after Barnaby's death in 1844 . He was the last of the Pencil Cohens in Dublin and died a bachelor at Charlemont Street aged 78. His death seemed to mark the end of the Ranelagh business as there is no record that it continued on as a going concern after this date. Only Abraham Cohen's neighbours in Ranelagh could have known the true extent of his eccentricities. But in 1854, the year of his death, details of his habits were published to the entire English-speaking world in *Gentleman's Magazine*.¹³

Executors of Abraham Cohen's interesting 1854 will were Sir Anthony de Rothschild of Grosvenor Place, Aaron Joseph of 2 Fitzroy Square and Saul Cohen of Hyde Park Street, Middlesex. ¹⁴ The will confirms that he left the enormous sum of £45,000, with much of it going to charity.

The Pencil Cohens are buried in the Jewish Cemetery, Ballybough. ¹⁵ Their graves are situated at the West Wall, row 1, each individual having a separate grave and headstone according to tradition.

¹¹ Louis Hyman, *The Jews of Ireland from earliest times to the year 1910*, page 91.

¹² *Freeman's Journal* , 17 September, 1866, page 1.

¹³ "Obituary" , *Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Review*, Vol. 41, 1854, page 335. Googlebooks.

¹⁴ National Archives Dublin, Char 1/15/p67. Will of Abraham Cohen, 9 Mar, 1854.

¹⁵ Diarmuid G. Hiney, "5618 and All That: the Jewish Cemetery Fairview Strand", *Dublin Historical Record*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 119-129.

As members of a Rabbinic family, the Cohens were not allowed to touch the dead or attend burials, apart from those of their family. Although Solomon Cohen is buried there too, his headstone is nowhere to be found. It is thought that his grave may have been one of many vandalised by the local population in the early 1800s in order to supply hearth stones for their houses.¹⁶ A tale from *Excursions through Ireland* published in 1820 and repeated in Louis Hyman's book, tells of a Jewish man's visit to a friend's house in Ballybough and then his astonishment that his father's last resting place appeared to lie over his friend's fireplace.

Sources

National Archives of Ireland

Commissioners of Charitable Donations Archive. 1800-1858. Char 1/15/p67.
Will of Abraham Cohen, 9 Mar, 1854.

Books

- Cromwell, Thomas, *Excursions through Ireland: comprising topographical and historical delineations of each province.....*, London 1820. via babel.hathitrust.org.
- Hiney, Diarmuid G., "5618 and All That: the Jewish Cemetery Fairview Strand", Dublin Historical Record, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Autumn, 1997).
- Hyman, Louis, *The Jews of Ireland :from earliest times to the year 1910* . Irish University press. 1972.
- Laidlaw, Petra, *An Index to the Jewish Community of the British Isles in 1851*, lulu.com, 2010.
- McDonnell, Gerry, *Mud Island Anthology*, Lapwing Publications, 2009.
- Rosenblatt, Stuart. *Irish Jewish Memorial Inscriptions and Early Synagogues*, "Ballybough Dublin, 1748-1908." Rosenblatt Series Vol 2.
- Shillman, Bernard, *A short history of the Jews in Ireland*. Cahill and Co. 1945.

Miscellaneous

- *Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Review*, Vol. 41, 1854. via Googlebooks.
- <http://bookhistory.blogspot.ie> . *Exeter Working Papers in Book History*, "Exeter Working Papers in British Book Trade History.
- *Midlands Historical Data collection of Trade Directories 1770-1941*. via ancestry.co.uk
- <http://bleistift.memm.de/?s=cohen>
- *Virtual Shtetl*, <http://www.sztetl.org.pl/en/article/leszno/5,history/>
- *Grace's Guide, British Industrial History*, http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Royal_Sovereign_Pencil_Co:_1934_Review
- <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>
- *Lezno Museum*, www.muzeum.leszno.pl
- *Yivo Encyclopaedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Leszno

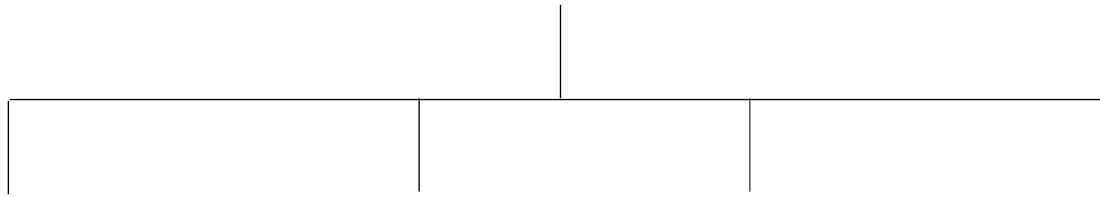
©Denise Dowdall

¹⁶Thomas Cromwell, *Excursions through Ireland: comprising topographical and historical delineations of each province.....*, London 1820. page 192 . babel.hathitrust.org

Cohen Family Tree

Rosetta Cohen
b. 1729 Posen
d.17/2/1810

Solomon Cohen
b? Posen
arrived Dublin ~
1770
d before 1816



Bernard(Barnaby) Cohen
b. 1765
d. 1844

Sarah Cohen
b. 1767
d. 19/5/1846

Jacob? Cohen
b ?
d. before 1834

Abraham Cohen
b. 1776
d. 20/1/1854

Samuel Cohen
b1831
d 1879

Sources for family tree:

- Rosenblatt, Stuart. Irish Jewish Memorial Inscriptions and Early Synagogues, “Ballybough Dublin, 1748-1908.” Rosenblatt Series Vol 2.
- Hyman, Louis, *The Jews of Ireland :from earliest times to the year 1910.*