

Morton Feldman: Early Family History

by Chris Villars

1. Introduction

Both Morton Feldman's parents were Russian Jews who emigrated to New York¹ in the early years of the twentieth century. This essay attempts to outline their family histories up to about 1940, primarily using US public records as the source of information (census returns, birth, marriage and death indexes, immigration passenger lists, etc.). Most US public records after 1940 are not currently available, so this forms a natural cut-off date. The essay is essentially a commentary on the Morton Feldman Family Tree published as a separate document².

Note on names: When they first arrived in New York, the Feldmans and the Breskins had their original Russian/Jewish first names. They quickly Americanised these, often by adopting an American name that sounded similar to the original, e.g. "Moische" became "Morris". In this essay, and the family tree that accompanies it, the Americanised names are used exclusively. A table giving the original Russian/Jewish names (as recorded in immigration passenger lists) is given as an Appendix.

Acknowledgement: Thanks to the following for reading the previous version of this essay, and providing valuable corrections and additions: Cheryl Feldman, Jay Feldman, Florence Feldman, Barbara Monk Feldman, and Gilbert Siegel.

2. Mother: Frances Breskin

The maiden name of Morton Feldman's mother was Breskin³. Her parents, Ethel Seldin and Meyer Breskin, lived in Bobruisk, Belarus, then part of Russia. Frances was the fifth of six children, all born in Bobruisk.

In 1899, Meyer Breskin emigrated on his own to New York, travelling via Rotterdam. It was very common for senior members of a family to emigrate first, and then to save money to bring over other family members later. Meyer sailed from Rotterdam on the *SS Rotterdam*⁴ on November 23rd 1899, and arrived at Ellis Island on December 3rd. Ethel and the six children joined him in New York two years later in 1901. They travelled the same route, sailing from Rotterdam on the *SS Amsterdam* on June 13th, and reaching Ellis Island on June 25th. The 10-day voyage from Holland to New York would have been a nightmarish experience given the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions in which steerage passengers travelled. Frances was just three years old at that time.

In 1905 the reunited Breskin family were all living together at 200 7th Avenue, Manhattan. By 1915, Frances's older brothers and sisters had all married and set up on their own, and she, her parents and younger brother, Milton, had moved to 585 Amsterdam Avenue, still in Manhattan. They later moved to 566 Amsterdam Avenue, and Frances lived there with them until she married Irving Feldman in 1917.

¹ In this essay, "New York" means New York City.

² <https://www.cnvill.net/mftree.pdf>

³ In the earliest public records this name is variously given as Bereskin, Beraskin or Beroskin. It appears standardised as Breskin after 1915.

⁴ All the Breskin and Feldman family members travelled as steerage passengers on ships operated by the Holland-America Line steamship company.

3. Father: Irving Feldman

Irving Feldman's parents, Morris Feldman and Hilda Diamond, lived in Pereyaslav, Ukraine, then part of Russia. Irving was the fourth of nine children. All except the last (David) were born in Pereyaslav.

In 1906, the family began emigrating to New York. The oldest daughter, Anna, was the first to go. She travelled across country to Antwerp, and then by steamship to New York. Her initial contacts in New York were her aunt and uncle, Lena and Joseph Striziver. Lena Striziver was Morris Feldman's sister. Joseph Striziver had emigrated to New York in 1894, followed by Lena and their children a year later⁵. Anna Feldman sailed from Antwerp on the *SS Kroonland* on April 28th 1906, and arrived at Ellis Island on May 8th. Her fare was paid by her aunt and uncle.

The following year, the two oldest sons, Harry and Joseph, made the trip, each travelling separately, and both also going via Antwerp. Harry's steamship passage was again paid by his aunt and uncle in New York. He sailed from Antwerp on the *SS Samland*, arriving at Ellis Island on April 2nd 1907. Joseph sailed from Antwerp on the *SS Zeeland*, and arrived at Ellis Island on December 24th. His fare was paid by his sister, Anna. Morris, also travelling on his own, made the journey sometime during 1908 or 1909. Then in 1910, Hilda and the five remaining children set off to follow, travelling via Rotterdam. Their steamship passage was paid by Morris.

For some reason, when Hilda reached Rotterdam she sailed with the four youngest children only, leaving Irving behind. Accounts passed down within the family differ as to exactly how this came about. The following summary combines elements of the account given in the published obituary of Herman Feldman⁶, one of Irving's younger brothers, with the story passed down from Irving himself:

Hilda and the five children left Pereyaslav in a horse-drawn carriage, and made their way to Vienna. From there, they planned to take a train to Rotterdam. However, in Vienna, either as a result of having her purse stolen or by being short-changed in some way, Hilda found herself without enough money to pay all the fares. She decided to take the train with the four youngest children, leaving Irving (the oldest, then sixteen) behind to earn enough money, possibly by working in a bakery, to pay his fare and follow them later. In the event, Irving *walked* from Vienna to Rotterdam by himself (a journey of around 700 miles). He arrived in Rotterdam some weeks after Hilda and the others had departed, and travelled on a later ship.

Hilda and her four youngest children sailed from Rotterdam on the *SS Ryndam* on July 30th 1910, reaching Ellis Island on August 9th, where they were reunited with Morris. Irving sailed from the same port six weeks later on the *SS Nieuw Amsterdam*, arriving at Ellis Island on September 25th, where he rejoined the family.

In 1915, five years after arriving in New York, all the younger members of the family, including Irving, were living together with their parents at 1630 Bathgate Avenue, in the Bronx district of New York. Their aunt and uncle, Lena and Joseph Striziver, were living nearby at 1660 Bathgate Avenue. In New York, there had been an addition to Morris and Hilda's family; their son David, born in August 1911, the only one of his generation to be born outside Russia. Tragically, there was also a loss. Their oldest child, Harry, died suddenly in February 1914. He was only twenty seven, and had married Annie Striziver (his uncle Joseph's half-sister) just three years earlier. The impact of this tragic event on the family must have been great. Perhaps an indication of this is the fact that in the years

⁵ In the immigration passenger lists, the Strizivers are recorded under the name Stiszewsky or Strisewsky.

⁶ Obituary of Herman Feldman, *Sun-Sentinel* newspaper, Broward County, Florida, February 11th 2006.

following Harry's death, his nearest siblings, Anna, Joseph and Irving, each had a son whom they named Harold, presumably in memory of him.

Irving Feldman married Francis Breskin on February 21st 1917. At the time of the marriage Frances was living with her parents at 566 Amsterdam Avenue, Manhattan. After the marriage Irving and Frances moved into an apartment at 572 Amsterdam Avenue, close to her parents. It was here that their first child, Harold, was born in December 1917. In 1920, both families were still living at the same addresses.

In October 1921, Frances's father, Meyer Breskin, died. He was fifty eight. After this, Irving and his family, along with his widowed mother in law and Frances's older brother Louis Breskin and his family apparently decided to pool their resources, and moved together out of Manhattan. They moved into a shared house at 3745 64th Street, Woodside, in the suburban Queens district of New York. This was where they were all living in 1925, and continued to live throughout the 1930s and 40s. This is where Morton Feldman was born on January 12th 1926, and where he lived throughout his early years.

The house in 64th Street was a two family house: The Breskins lived on the top floor, and the Feldmans lived on the first [ground] floor. The Feldmans' apartment consisted of two small bedrooms and a bathroom in the rear; one bedroom for Ethel, and one for Frances and Irving. Then came a small eat-in kitchen, a large dining room, and a small living room with a baby grand piano. There was an enclosed front porch with a day bed which Harold and Morton shared at night. When you entered the first floor from the street, there was a very long hallway with a secretary desk at the end in which Frances kept newspaper clippings of Morton's concerts, and postcards from his worldwide travels. On a sideboard in the dining room sat a bronze samovar which the Breskins had brought from Russia.⁷



The house in 64th St, Woodside, where Feldman was born and lived into the 1940s.⁸



Ethel Breskin, with her son, Louis, Feldman's maternal grandmother and uncle.⁹

⁷ This description of the apartment uses information from Cheryl Feldman, Jay Feldman, Florence Feldman, and Gilbert Siegel. The piano mentioned was Morton's piano, bought around 1938, and kept by him all his life.

⁸ New York City official tax photo, 1940.

⁹ Photo taken by George Siegel in the early 1940s. Reproduced by kind permission of his son, Gilbert Siegel.

4. Family Businesses

4.1 The Breskins: Laundry and Dry Cleaning

Shortly after his family settled in New York, Meyer Breskin set up as a newspaper dealer. His sons Louis and Edward worked for him as newsboys. Later Meyer worked as a launderer, and by 1920 (a year before his death) he had established his own business, the *Enterprise Hand Laundry*, apparently run from premises on Amsterdam Avenue.

Meyer's son Edward established a separate laundry business of his own, which eventually came to specialise in dry cleaning. The business was first called the *Louie Maison French Hand Laundry*, and later *Louie Maison French Cleaning*¹⁰. In the 1920s the business premises were at 20 East 9th Street, Manhattan. This business appears to have prospered during the 1920s and 30s, and formed the basis of Edward's highly successful laundry and dry cleaning business, which made him a wealthy man.

Louis and Milton Breskin, though both involved in their father's laundry business when he was alive, went on to work in different fields. Louis set up on his own as a retailer of butter and eggs throughout the 1920s and 30s, and Milton worked during this time as a dairyman for a New York milk company.

4.2 The Feldmans: Children's Clothing

Soon after his arrival in New York, Morris Feldman obtained work as a presser of coats in a tailor's shop, and continued in this line of work throughout the 1920s and 30s, eventually doing this job in a coat factory.

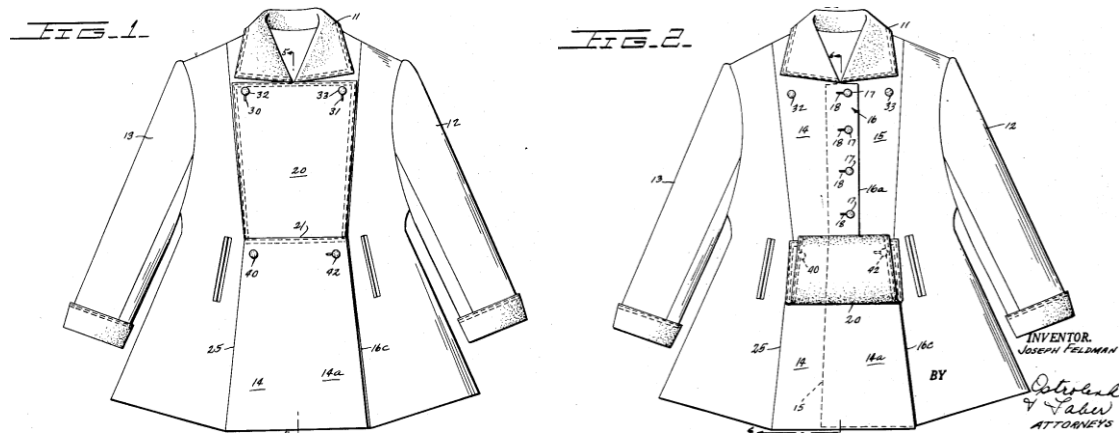
Morris's two oldest sons, Joseph and Irving, both described themselves as tailors on their immigration documents. In New York, Joseph first worked as an employee in tailoring businesses owned by others, but by 1930 he had established a business of his own making ladies coats, eventually specialising in the manufacture of children's coats. His business – *Scher & Feldman Inc*, manufacturer of children's coats – was located throughout the 1940s and 50s at 520 8th Avenue, Manhattan.

Similarly, by 1930, after working in a variety of jobs in tailoring and outside it, Irving had also established his own business, which also came to specialise in making children's clothing. By the late 1940s Irving had two factories; one in Manhattan, managed by his oldest son, Harold, and the other in Queens, closer to where the family lived. The Manhattan factory closed in the early 50s. It was at the factory in Queens that Morton Feldman worked in the family business from the time he left High School in 1944 until the early 1970s.

Of the two businesses, Joseph's was the most successful, eventually making him very wealthy. Fred and David Feldman also worked in Joseph's business: Fred as a factory manager, and David as a salesman. In the 1950s, David moved, with his wife Gussie, to Los Angeles, as West Coast sales representative of Joseph's company. He too was very successful and made himself wealthy, with an expensive home in Beverly Hills.

¹⁰ French cleaning was an early name for dry cleaning, so-called because the modern process was invented by a Frenchman, Jean Baptiste Jolly.

In 1953, Joseph Feldman obtained the patent for a unique design of child's winter coat which incorporated a protective flap in the front that could be unbuttoned, rolled down and re-buttoned to form a muff.



Joseph Feldman's patented coat combined with muff, shown with the flap buttoned-up (Fig 1) and rolled-down and re-buttoned as a muff (Fig 2)¹¹

Before his untimely death, Harry Feldman had also worked in a coat factory, and Louis Feldman worked as a furrier. Thus, almost all of Morris and Hilda's sons worked in the clothing business. Herman was the exception. He pursued an academic career, eventually obtaining a law degree from Fordham University. He then worked as a public school teacher in New York, eventually becoming Principal of Frederick Douglass Junior High School in Harlem, and later, Horace Greeley Junior High School, Long Island City.

5. Conclusion

Scattered amongst Morton Feldman's many writings and talks are occasional anecdotes about a number of his relatives. Hopefully the present essay, and the accompanying family tree, gives a glimpse of who the brother, mother, father, maternal grandmother, and uncles, Joe, Dave, Louis and Eddy, whom Morton talks about, actually were, and how they fit into the wider Feldman and Breskin family histories.

Appendix: Table of Americanised vs Original Feldman/Breskin First Names

Feldman		Breskin	
Lena	Riwke	Meyer	Meyer
Morris	Moische	Ethel	Itte
Hilda	Hinde	Louis	Lewitz
Harry	Hersch	Edward Frank	Itzek
Anna	Henie	Mary	Meriam
Joseph	Jossel	Irene	Chaie
Irving	Isidore	Frances	Feige
Lillian	Lea	Milton (Max)	Motte
Louis	Leibe		
Herman	Chaim		
Fred (Frank)	Efraim		
David	David		

¹¹ Images from the specification of United States Patent 2654094: "Coat combined with muff", granted October 6th 1953.