



THE STORY OF FRUMKIN'S WINES

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by

Brian Sacks

With acknowledgements to

Shalva Dimson

Elroy Dimson

Lionel Frumkin

And with particular thanks to

June Gordon

**the last “regular” behind the counter
at L. Frumkin & Co**

Published by

The Frumkin Foundation

2022

The Story of Frumkin's Wines

For more than a century, the name of L. Frumkin and Company, Wine Merchants, was known throughout the London community - not only as a wine shop, but as the place where poor Jewish immigrants to London's East End could come for advice and practical help.

For more than seventy years of that century, Aaron Frumkin (Zichrono Livracha – may his memory be for a blessing) worked for the firm. In his latter years he spoke and wrote eloquently about its history. The following piece is compiled in very large part from the wealth of material Aaron left us.



Aaron as a babe in his mother's arms, 1910

The founding of the Firm

Arye Leib Frumkin, his wife Sheina and family arrived in England in late 1893 and settled in London's East End. The East End was the home of two distinct Jewish communities: North of the Whitechapel Road lived the older-established Sephardi Jewish community while south of the Whitechapel Road lived the many thousands of Jewish immigrants who had fled from persecution in Eastern Europe. The East End's Docklands was also an area frequented by seamen, an area of vice, gin palaces and whore houses.

Arye Leib found no vacancies in the pulpit – many Rabbis had recently come to London from Russia. He also found that he was not cut out to be a tailor (no pun intended). Soon the family rented a Public House off Commercial Road, but then found that the Law demanded that the Pub stay open on Shabbat – so this enterprise came to an abrupt end. The venture that was to follow would operate for more than a century, and would never during that time open on Shabbat or Jewish festival.

The family decided that, having wide links with the large Jewish community, who were living mainly in the East End, they would sell Kosher wines. During 1894, Arye Leib negotiated the purchase of a building site on the corner of Commercial Road and Cannon Street Road, in the heart of the East End. He invited a Mr. Lusk and his partner to join him in its development. On completion of the buildings, L. Frumkin and Company (Wine Merchants), of 162 Commercial Road, and Luck and Bennett (Hosiery) of 164 Commercial Road, came into existence. The initial "L" stood for Louis, the name that Arye Leib went by for official purposes. Later on (around 1907), the side portion of 162 Commercial Road was let to J.L. Fine J.P. as a Travel Agency.

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L. Frumkin & Co, 162 Commercial Road. El, around 1914. Zecharia Dimson at far left, next to young Aaron Frumkin. Rachel Frumkin is at the left of doorway, Rachel Dimson towards the right

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The first twenty years – 1894 to the start of the First World War

Once the wine business had been set up, Arye Leib turned largely to writing books. Sheina took over the business and established a link with the Company which had taken over the vineyards that Arye Leib had set up in Palestine years before. Wines from this source were then imported for many years.



Wine Label from 1900 – courtesy Lionel Frumkin

By the early 1900's some of the wider family also worked for the firm. Arye Leib's son Elias (Eliyahu Ephraim) compounded liqueurs, particularly Cherry Brandy for which the Company became famous. He also canvassed for customers. Business was brisk, with an average of 300 customers at any one time. But these

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customers generally paid off their purchases at threepence per week and sometimes absconded to America leaving debts unpaid.

Arye Leib's daughter Rachel manufactured raisin wine and blended imported wines to produce wines of differing strengths. Rachel invented the first kosher 'champagne', that is, sparkling wine for the Jewish market. She also worked as a saleslady in the shop. In 1907 Rachel married Rabbi Zecharia Dimson, who also became a partner in the firm. To expand the business, Zecharia canvassed for customers further afield. On one sales visit to Notting Hill he met a beautiful young lady, Rachel Radogowski, and urged Elias to meet her. Elias and Rachel married in 1909.

In 1911 Arye Leib and Sheina returned to Palestine, leaving the business in the hands of their children.

L. Frumkin and Company had become during these years, not just a business, but an institution. The corner of Commercial Road and Cannon Street Road was known as Frumkin's Corner, the outstanding landmark of the area. Sheina had quickly been recognised by the local Jewish residents as a woman to be consulted on many subjects, particularly health and family relationships. Frumkin's became the place where new immigrants, after a few nights lodging at the Mansell Street Jewish Shelter, would be sent to receive monetary help and advice on finding work and a place to live.

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For part of the early 20th century, the firm was called Frumkin & Dimson, representing the partnership of the two families. Photo restored by Elroy Dimson.

The First World War

The War changed all aspects of life in the East End. Many young men went away to fight. Frumkin's Corner became a Speakers' Corner. Every day a podium would be set up and speakers pressed the need for volunteers; at the same time Suffragettes, including Emily Pankhurst, preached for Votes for Women.

In 1916 the Russian Convention was signed. Under this agreement, all Russian Nationals not eligible to serve in the British Army, were to be shipped back to serve in the Russian Army. The night before the deadline, thirty young men assembled above the shop and were

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given a meal, drinks, clothing and a hearty send off. Only two are known to have survived.

During the war years the price of spirits trebled; whisky rose in price from three shillings and sixpence to ten shillings and sixpence a bottle. Opening hours were also restricted. The family had been living above the shop but in 1917, German bombing forced the family to evacuate to Twyford in Berkshire. In late 1918, after the end of the war, Elias and family moved back to Upper Clapton. In 1919 Zecharia Dimson and family also moved to Clapton.



(This and subsequent labels are not related chronologically to the text alongside)

After the War

After the war ended, the British people turned to living life to the full, and Frumkin's had its part to play in this change of mood. Engaged couples, having chosen their ring at Kutchinsky's, would cross the road to place their Drinks order with Frumkin's. On average Frumkin's supplied thirty wedding orders per week.

Rabbi Zecharia Dimson often visited the City to buy wines of all types, and to attend Wine Auctions. On these visits he dressed impeccably in frock coat and top hat, and was remembered for many years after his death by City gentlemen.

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Zecharia's great love was for Palestine. During 1923 he was asked by the Jewish National Fund to inspect land in the North of the country, with a view to purchase. During this visit he contracted typhoid, and died on January 4, 1924 at the Shaarei Zedek Hospital



in Jerusalem. He was only 38 years old. His death was a terrible shock to the whole family. Aaron wrote of his deep sadness on the passing of his uncle Zecharia: "He was extremely loving and kind to his two sons and to me. He taught me how to swim and how to play cricket, chess and draughts, and when he had the time, he paid me far more attention

on outings than my own father ever did".

Zecharia's widow Rachel Dimson was too distressed to continue to work in the firm. The main responsibility for the business fell to Elias' wife Rachel Frumkin. But she herself had devoted her childhood to looking after her elder sister. She had not received any education, and could neither read nor write. Her son Aaron, though he was only fourteen, felt that he had leave school to join the firm. Guided by members of staff he learned to appreciate wines, and by age 15 he was attending wine auctions on his own. The senior cellarman, Reb Moishe, taught Aaron all he knew about producing and bottling wines and running the cellar.

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When Rachel Dimson recovered from her grief, she decided to branch out on her own. In 1929, she opened R. Dimson Ltd, in the up-and-coming neighbourhood of Cricklewood in North West London. She imported products from Palestine and sold them under her own name.

Rachel Frumkin



From 1926 onwards, Rachel Frumkin had complete charge of the Frumkin's counter, though at busy times everyone helped. Her personality developed and she had a wonderful memory for names and faces. People would travel long distances to talk with her – about drinks or about other matters.

Rachel's advice would be sought about minor or major matters – even matchmaking, family concerns and birth control. Her matchmaking efforts resulted in many a happy union.

All who came would be offered a drink and a slice of cake – Len Deighton referred to this in his 'London Dossier'. Rachel's advice on wines was almost always taken, and she was very successful in securing wedding orders. Her charm won over suppliers as well, and if there was ever a shortage one could almost guarantee that the goods would still be forthcoming.

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Rachel Frumkin at the counter, 1960

Rachel Frumkin realised that at times like Passover there were very many willing purchasers. At the same time there were widows and old men in dire need of some income. Rachel recognised that the firm could offer some of these people work as agents, to secure further sales. At one time the firm had 50 of these 'travellers' on the road. Christmas-time was the other busy period, with East End firms fostering their relationships with their clients by giving gifts of wines or spirits. Aaron wrote that for the three weeks before both Passover and Christmas he would not see his bed, but perhaps snatch an hour's sleep a night on the floor behind the counter. One of his duties before Passover was the preparation of 500 bottles of raisin wine for distribution to the needy; his mother insisted that everyone should be able to drink wine at Passover.

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Aaron tells this story, showing something of Rachel's personality:



One Sunday morning, at about 11 o'clock, the shop was full and a long queue had formed in the street. The Law did not permit the sale of any liquor before noon on a Sunday, and a neighbour telephoned the Police. In due course, a Police inspector arrived and said "Mrs. Frumkin, it seems to me that

you are breaking the Law". Rachel replied "How can you say that? You know it is before our Jewish holidays - all these people are personal friends, who have come to wish me well."

During these years, the business had many distinguished customers: the Bishop of Stepney bought clarets and loved to converse with Rachel; Mrs. Sebag Montefiore bought Kosher wines, especially Mizrachi No. 4. One young man working for the firm would dress up elegantly, enter the House of Lords, and sell liqueurs to several members who were regular purchasers.

During the American Prohibition, the Mayor of New York bought the best wines that the shop had to offer. His courier was a seaman who made the New-York-to-London round trip every six weeks, and sewed twelve bottles into the lining of his coat.

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ARE YOU ? GETTING MARRIED,
OR MAKING PARTIES
THEN COME TO

162.
FRUMKIN'S COMMERCIAL ROAD,
E.1

The old Established firm with a reputation for
Liquers, Brandies, Spirits & Wines, Etc.

Note the address :- 162, COMMERCIAL ROAD, E.1

התונה האבעו אדער
מאכט איר פארטייעס דען קמט צו
נעהט איר ?
פרומקינ'ס
די בעסטע ליסקרו, ברענדיס, ספיריטס און וויינען
162, סאמערשאל רויד, א. 1

The 1930's

Unfortunately, Elias Frumkin made a number of investments that proved very costly when the Stock Market Crash occurred in 1929. This meant that the 1930's was to be a period of fighting back for the firm. Aaron decided that it was necessary to secure as many wedding orders as possible, and he put four travellers on the road for this purpose. The most successful of these was Mr. Abrahams. A price war resulted amongst the Jewish wine merchants, but the firm was generally very successful, averaging orders for thirty weddings and several barmitzvahs per week.



After the rise of Hitler in 1933, Frumkin's received many appeals for help from German Jews. Rachel committed herself to helping as much as she could. She obtained, over a period, permits for six girls to come and work for her. She also advised German citizens who

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were in England only on a temporary visit, how to best tackle their problems. For some years she almost lived in the Foreign Office and Home Office and, due to this persistence, a number of families were permitted to live in England. Rachel always maintained that this was the greatest period of her life.



Bottle Decorations

After the Second World War

By the end of the Second World War, Rachel, Elias and Aaron had been joined at 162 Commercial Road by Elias' sons-in-law Wilfred Goldberg and Rabbi Meyer Frydman.

The 1950s saw a migration of the London Jewish Community out of the East End into the suburbs of north-west London, and the growth of the Jewish clothing trade in the West End. Frumkin's responded

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Frumkin's Corner, 1947

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to these changes by setting up further branches - first in Hale Lane, Edgware and then at 66 Great Titchfield Street in the West End.



The Hale Lane branch operated from around 1949 to 1960. It was run by Aaron's cousin Monty Jacoby, until he emigrated to Australia in the mid-1950s. For the last 4 or 5 years of its existence, the branch employed a Miss Leon as manageress, overseen by Wilfred Goldberg.

Aaron set up the Great Titchfield Street branch in 1959. He acknowledged that this move was influenced by his second wife Yetta working in the West End, and by tensions between himself and his brothers-in-law Wilfred and Meyer. Meanwhile, Rachel, Wilfred and Meyer continued to run the East End branch, with occasional help from Rachel and Elias' youngest daughter Libby Sacks. Rachel passed away in 1968 and was deeply mourned by the hundreds of people who had become her friends. Wilfred died in September 1970, and the East End branch closed in early 1971.

The Great Titchfield Street shop was smaller but more up-market than its Commercial Road parent. At first it catered to a mainly

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01-636 5532

01-580 9701

Directors:
A. FRUMKIN
G. FRYDMAN
R. GOLDBERG

LF
& CO. LTD.

Telegrams:
Inland: FRUMWIN, EDO, LONDON
Overseas: FRUMWIN, LONDON

L. FRUMKIN & CO. LTD.

Established 1894

Wines — Spirits — Cigars

66 GT. TITCHFIELD STREET,
LONDON, W.1

Please accept with our compliments

*This
stamp*



*issued on
behalf
of charity*

*depicting Rabbi Leib Frumkin
author and scholar,
the Founder of our Company during the year
1894.*

*1980 being our 86th Anniversary
we are proud to announce the establishment
in Israel of the
FRUMKIN FOUNDATION
for the advancement of Hebrew studies*

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Jewish clientele, but this changed as the 'rag trade' shrank. Two break-ins in the early 1980s hastened a change in the nature of the shop. On each occasion, the shop window was broken and a few bottles stolen, and so Aaron decided to only keep dummy bottles in the window. The most interesting dummies, ranging from miniatures to Nebuchadnezzar sizes, were champagne bottles. Thus came about the shop's emergence as a specialist in champagnes.

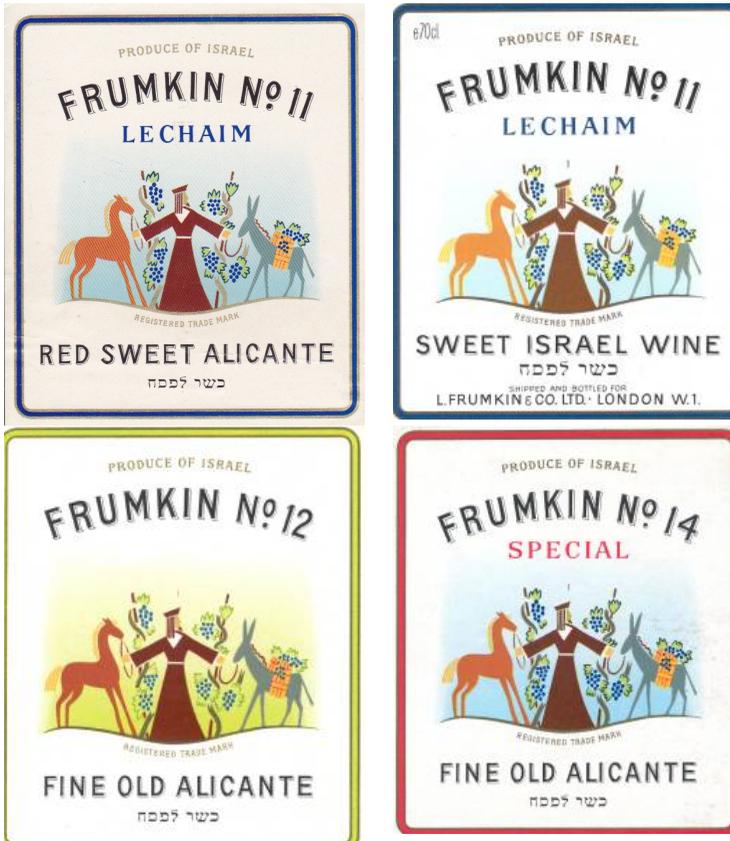


Aaron Frumkin behind the counter at Great Tichfield Street

The atmosphere of the shop was captured in the 1990 Radio 4 programme "Frumkin's: a tale of two wine shops", which featured Aaron, his daughter June, Phyllis Seymour and Ben Nathan. By the time of this programme, Ben had worked with Aaron for 55 years and Phyllis for 33 years. Both Ben and Phyllis talked of Frumkin's as "home" and "family", and worked at Frumkin's until they died -

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Ben in his mid-seventies in 1992, Phyllis at age seventy in 1994. This family – Aaron, June, Ben and Phyllis, occasionally joined behind the counter by Aaron's sister Libby and his son Lionel – always remained a family that supported not just its own members but whoever stepped inside the door.

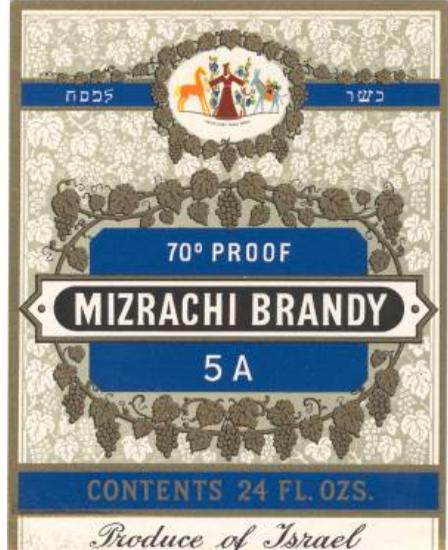
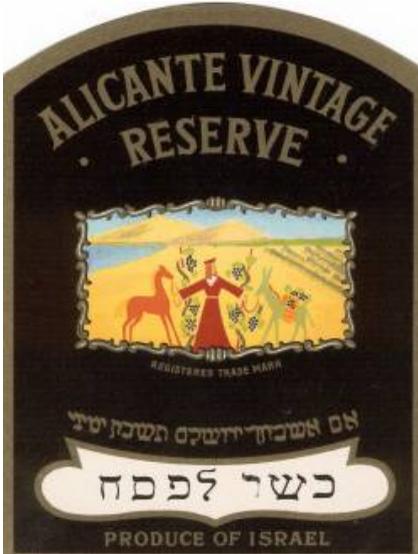


Variations on a Theme

Aaron, however, spoke in the programme of the threat to small businesses posed by high West End rents. Frumkin's was also now a family whose younger members had chosen the professions rather

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than trade. The firm celebrated its centenary in 1994, but in 1997 closed its doors for the last time.



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1994, Celebrating the Centenary: David Dimson, Phyllis Dimson, Libby Sacks, June Gordon, Aaron Frumkin

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1994, inside Great Titchfield Street: Aaron Frumkin, June Gordon, Libby Sacks, Phyllis Dimson, David Dimson

Some Press Cuttings



Marylebone Mercury November 19, 1982

Wine time at Passover

Further to Monty Modlyn's interview with Dr Sammy Sacks (LONDON EXTRA, October 28), where he says that every Pesach there were queues outside Frumkin's wine shop in Commercial Road, I would like you to know that the reason for the queues was that the late Mrs Frumkin — my mother — gave away 500 bottles of wine to people who would not have been able to afford wine for Pesach.

AARON FRUMKIN
L. Frumkin & Co Ltd,
66 Gt Titchfield Street,
London, W1.

*Jewish Chronicle
November 11, 1983*

MONTY MIDLVIN TALKING

Wine man's youthful secret



Aaron Frumkin, with a double magnum of champagne, behind the counter in Great Titchfield Street

Frumkin's wine shop on the corner of Commercial Road and Cannon Street Road was once as well known to east Londoners as the Tower of London. Those long queues for Passover wine will stick in many people's memories.

Frumkin's, which is believed to be the oldest independent wine merchant in London, moved away from the East End in 1969 as Jewish residents and business folk shifted to the West End and north London.

Aaron Frumkin, the founder's grandson, is 79, and still serving behind the counter in Great Titchfield Street in the West End.

Aaron looks no more than 50. What keeps you looking so young? "I have always kept myself active. I come into the shop every day. I enjoy a glass or two of champagne, and I like meeting people."

I mentioned to Aaron how as a boy I used to accompany my father to buy Passover wine and the odd bottle of cherry brandy and advocate that my mother enjoyed very much.

"I will never forget the warmth of the East End. I was born and lived above the shop that was started by my grandfather, Rabbi Leib Frumkin, way back in 1894.

"My grandfather was a pioneer in Palestine. He left Lithuania to settle in Petach Tikva, near Tel Aviv, in 1886. A street is named after him there and in Jerusalem. He came to London in 1893."

Where did you go to school? "Firstly, in the East End, and then we moved to Upper Clapton, an area that was then considered a posh place to live. My father, Elias, was a founder of the Lea Bridge Road Synagogue."

"Left Detmole Road School, in Clapton, when I was 14, and went straight into the wine shop, working in the large cellar helping to make raisin wine that sold for 16d (7½p) a bottle. It was strong stuff, and could make you *shukh* quite easily."

"My mother, Rachel, really was the mainstay of the business."

"I have three sisters, Rose, who is 75, Gerie, 77, and Libby, 69. They all used to help in the old wine shop. My daughter, Jane Gordon, who is a fully trained physiotherapist, helps me now."

"Ben Nathan, the tall chap lowering cases into the cellar, has been with me from the East End days — that is, for more than 50 years. And Phyllis Seymour has been with me for more than 30 years."

Tell me about your mother, Rachel. You say she ordered

you to make at least 500 bottles of raisin wine for the poor in the East End? "Yes, there were so many poor folk then. In fact, mother kept me busy working in the cellar and sacks under the counter. Passover time was so busy and exciting. I loved it, I really did, all the hard work. As I grew

older my main job was to visit the brides' parents so they could order the wines and spirits. Often my mother paid something towards their simchas."

Why did your mother more or less run the shop? "My father, Elias, was a great talmudist."

He used to study and pray,

which was superb for him, but it couldn't pay the bills. So mother was the boss."

Have you studied the wine trade yourself? "I have visited every top chateau in France. I stayed at the home of Madame Bollinger and the owners of most of the Moet et Chandon champagne growers."

"My son, Lionel, who is a

wine consultant, went to Bordeaux University to study the wine trade, and to the Sorbonne."

Just before I left, Aaron said: "I heard that you and your wife, Dorothy, are celebrating your pearl wedding this month." Yes, it's true. Let's hope I look as good as you do at 79. Chayim.

INCIDENTALLY CHRONICLER

IN THE TRUE SPIRIT OF TRADITION



This family picture taken in 1910 shows six-month-old Aaron Frumkin in his mother's arms outside the family's wine shop in Commercial Road in London's East End

In an age of high street multiple off-licences and supermarket outlets the independent wine and spirits retailer is very much the exception. However, one firm of shippers still relishing its independence is L. Frumkin & Co Ltd, the oldest Jewish wine merchants in Britain.

The first 96 years of the firm, which opened its doors in 1894 in premises in Commercial Road, will be celebrated in a Radio 4 documentary called "Frumkin's — a tale of two wine shops," to be broadcast on December 30, at 10.15 pm.

Frumkin's was started by Rabbi Leib Frumkin, a scholar and writer who hailed originally from Kovno in Lithuania. He was, in the words of Aaron Frumkin, his grandson and now head of the business, "a man who was far too busy with his studies to accept a call to a pulpit, though he attended the Sandy's Row Synagogue regularly."

"He opened the shop to provide regular supplies of kosher wine to local East End synagogues and to the then growing Jewish community. An active partner was my grandmother, Jane, who carried on, in a modified form, the tradition of the rebetzin having a communal monopoly for the sale of oil or salt," Mr Frumkin added.

Frumkin's moved to its new premises in the West End's Great Titchfield Street in

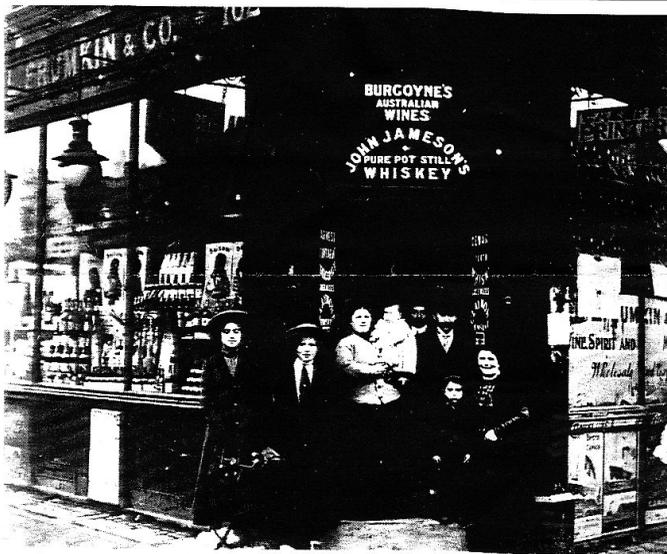
1959. "The character of the business is still much the same," Aaron Frumkin said, adding: "We still import kosher wines and spirits as well as non-kosher ones, but we have stopped dealing in cigars, they're just too expensive."

At the age of 79 his ambitions are modest, mainly to see the firm celebrate its centenary. As for the longer term, he is happy to know that a fourth generation, his daughter, will carry on the family name and business into the 21st century.

"Unfortunately," Aaron Frumkin concluded, "I cannot expect the founder's great-grandson to play an active part as, like his great-grandfather, he is a busy academic." His name? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

Two Jewish Chronicle Features from 1989

DIARY



Aaron Frumkin — the babe in arms

Birthday celebratory tasting

BOLLINGER at 6/8 a bottle; Veuve Clicquot, 7/6; Perrier Jouet 5/6; Champagne, Very Fine Quality, British, 2/-. You wouldn't get away with that nowadays.

These figures were picked from a price list issued by the London firm of L. Frumkin & Co in 1910. The reason it appeared was the 79th birthday of Aaron Frumkin, who still goes into his shop in Great Titchfield Street in the West End, every day.

To mark the birthday last week, the Frumkin shop held a tasting of Moët & Chandon's Petite Liqueur sparkling liqueur.

In 1910, the Frumkin shop was in Commercial Road, East London. It had been started by Aaron Frumkin's grandfather, Lionel, back in the last century. The birthday boy was able to produce a photograph of himself outside the shop in 1910, albeit a babe in arms.

At one time, Frumkin had three shops — the third being in Edgware — but he has now "retired" to his Great Titchfield Street shop.

The 1910 price list makes interesting reading. With champagnes costing around six or seven bob, a bottle of Haig whisky would have set you back 4/-. Among the brands is John Walker's Kilmarnock Whisky, now known somewhat less formally. You could buy Liquid Sunshine Rum, Fine Old London Gin (sweetened or unsweetened), and Ginger Brandy. Or how about: "Advocat (sic) Liqueur, a combination of Brandy and New Laid Eggs, recommended for Invalids."

Snow relief

THERE'S no business like snow business. Spittoon reported recently that the mild winter had put a spoke in the wheels of an ad campaign.

Foster's lager's ad-placer's sat through the winter watching the weather forecasters spouting forth, and praying for some white stuff to go with their amber nectar.

A "seasonal" ad featuring snow — and Paul Hogan, of

course — was loaded and ready to fire as soon as the first flake floated earthwards. But all winter they waited, and not so much as a soggy bit of sleet appeared, in London at least.

And then, just as most sane people were packing up their winter boots and putting their snow shoes away for another year, came spring. Spring, quite naturally in this topsyturvy year, meant snow.

Presumably great sighs of relief and rejoicing were heard at Foster's as Hogan made a late entrance, delivered his punch line, and disappeared from the TV screen almost as quickly as the snow on the London roads. Blink and you missed it.

It may seem rash to prepare an advertisement when you can't be sure when it will be used. This has left Spittoon speculating on great topical ads that were never used. An ad to commemorate England regaining the World Cup, perhaps? A summer drought along the lines of 1976? A tribute to Nottingham Forest winning a cup double? There must be hundreds of long shots like that.

Spittoon



Aaron Frumkin with some of his 3,000 bottles

Meet a man with a lotta bottles

WINE MERCHANT Aaron Frumkin is a man with a lot of "baby" bottles... more than 3,000 of them at the last count. But they're certainly not for feeding babies.

Gleaming and glistening in an infinite variety of colours, they are miniature liqueur bottles which take pride of place in Aaron's shop.

The miniatures, many of them highly prized and worth considerably more than a vintage bottle of champagne, come from countries all round the world.

So do visitors to Aaron's London shop—all eager to see his bristling bottle battalion.

Stacked neatly together, like little sentinels, and with brightly coloured stoppers, they provide a warm welcome to Aaron's shop in Great Titchfield Street.

"Some of the most prized bottles come from European countries like Finland, Russia and Czechoslovakia," he says.

"One is in the shape of a French gendarme. It's from the Caribbean and is valued at £25."

Why does Aaron devote so much time to collecting miniatures?

ATTRACTION

"I find them educational," he says. "Because I'm a wine merchant, I have to know about the types of liqueur available.

"By ordering miniatures I discover the quality of the liqueur."

One of the attractions about the miniature bottles is that they are individually crafted instead of machine-made. Most are made of glass, but some are produced in china or ceramic.

"It's a selling point," Aaron explains, pointing out a bottle in

the shape of an orb with a jewelled cross as its stopper.

"This one was made in France, and is filled with passion fruit liqueur," he says. "It is a famous bottle, and one that is very attractive."

Rynbende, the Dutch company, produced a miniature which is now a collector's item, and is no longer made.

The bottle is divided into four chambers, each with a different liqueur inside—kummel, orange curacao, creme de menthe and cherry brandy.

CATERPILLAR

Other more eccentric miniatures have creatures inside them. A Mexican tequila has a caterpillar inside the bottle to give it a touch of authenticity.

"It's because the liqueur is made from the extract of leaves that the caterpillar feeds on," Aaron says.

Another charming miniature is made by Bols. Shaped like a bell, it has a tiny model ballerina set inside. Wind the base of the bottle and the ballerina begins to dance.

Aaron—whose wine business, Frumkins, has been established since 1894—travels far and wide to add to his collection. He has been known to bring back 150 bottles on one trip abroad, but sticks usually to a modest 40, though even these can cause problems at Customs.

Not surprisingly, Aaron's shop is not short of customers including the rich and famous.

One who was a regular caller was the late Reginald Bosanquet.

"He was a very kind man," Aaron says, "and often used to bring me back bottles when he had been away."



Toast of the trade

Drink in the tale of a vintner of vintage standing

R4 AARON FRUMKIN started work at the age of 14 in his grandmother's Commercial Road wine shop, selling kosher wines to the Jewish community of London's East End. Today, just a few months off his 80th birthday, he still puts in a full, five-day week at his own little wine shop in Great Titchfield Street, happy — as he himself puts it — to be 'the oldest independent working wine merchant in London'.

But what Aaron prides himself on most is the quality of the service offered to customers by himself and his loyal members of staff (his assistants Ben and Phyllis have been with him 55 years and 30 years respectively). Old-fashioned courtesy is the order of the day and, however busy they may be with Christmas or New Year orders, you can always be sure of advice and a friendly chat at Frumkins.

"It's a family tradition," Aaron explains. "We enjoy talking to people on any subject."

His daughter June (pictured above with Aaron in the shop) continues this tradition of friendly, personal attention, though perhaps not quite as personal as that offered by Aaron's mother: "In the old days she turned the shop into an institution by advising East End women on birth control!"

And those were the days, he reckons, when a bottle of Mouton Rothschild 1945 cost £11.55 (you'd be lucky to pick one up for £300 today) and suppliers invited you to taste even the most exalted wines: "They used to be such distinguished people, devoted to wine. Now it's got into the hands of accountants and they couldn't care less about quality."

Aaron has drunk the best at the greatest vineyards of Europe but this New Year, as ever, his tipple will be a modest Burgundy: "That's my favourite — a nice Chamberlin or Nuits-St-Georges. But it's the glass of cognac a day that keeps me going!"

DAVID GILLARD

■ The Saturday Feature: Frumkins, 10.15pm Radio 4

December 12, 1984

Radio Times December 30, 1989

Ruth Rothenberg gets a taste of a Jewish family business

A drink to Frumkin's anniversary

A family party is planned to celebrate the 100th anniversary of a wine shop that started in the East End but has now found a home in central London.

The extended Frumkin family will toast the firm's founder, Rabbi Arye Leib Frumkin, and his grandson, Aaron, who still comes in every day as he approaches his 84th birthday this month.

Aaron Frumkin retains fond memories of his East End upbringing, when he brewed up raisin wine and mead at 162 Commercial Road.

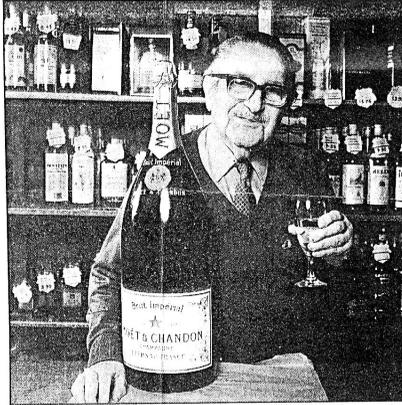
His rabbinical grandfather came into the business by a roundabout route. Rabbi Frumkin had left Lithuania for Palestine around 1870 and was among the resettlers of Petach Tikvah, which had been abandoned by earlier Jewish colonists because of malaria.

He was forced out of the country after an Arab workman had a fatal accident while building a well for him. He arrived in London in 1893.

The following year, he started selling kosher wines to the growing Jewish community of the East End, leaving the business to be run by his wife, Sheina (Jane), while he concentrated on his studies.

He returned to Palestine in 1910, leaving the business in the hands of his son, Elya, just as Elya's son, Aaron, was born.

Aaron Frumkin grew up thoroughly versed in the wine trade. His mother, Rachel, was widely known for her social work among the poor, advising on anything from measles to birth control. When Jewish refugees began pouring over from the Continent in



Bubbly personality: Aaron Frumkin raises a glass to a century of business

the 1930s, she badgered the Foreign Office for permits and arranged the newcomers' accommodation.

Before Pesach, she would distribute 500 bottles of home-made wine to the poor, who lined up outside the shop door, while crowds milled round the busy Pesach market in nearby Hessel Street.

"They came in through the front door and went out at the back, and woe betide anyone who came back for more," recalled Mr Frumkin, who took over the wine-making when he was 19. He broke hundreds of dozens of eggs to use the yolks for advocaat — the whites were sent to a baker. He became *the* wine merchant for

Jewish weddings, catering a peak of 30 a week in the 1930s.

His own wedding picture — taken by the fashionable photographer of the day, Boris, in 1931 — shows him with his shock of thick black hair, now a distinguished grey, and his late wife, Sadie, in her beaded wedding gown.

The kosher wine trade has changed over the years, with the development of Israel's own table wines and the shift in Jewish population. Frumkin's had an Edgware branch in the 1950s and 1960s. The East End shop closed in 1969.

But the firm had already moved to the West End in 1959, where a vibrant Jewish rag trade operated north of Oxford Street.

"We used to have a totally Jewish clientele here, but the rag trade has shrunk," Mr Frumkin acknowledged.

The cosy shop in Great Titchfield Street exudes a calm, courteous, old-fashioned atmosphere, with knowledgeable service from wine expert Lionel Frumkin, Aaron's son, and his daughter, June Gordon, a former physiotherapist at the London Jewish Hospital.

"We are very personal and local," Mr Frumkin said. "Our customers are loyal and so are our staff. Our secretary, Phyllis Seymour, has been with us 33 years."

Also looking in once a week or so is his youngest sister, Libby Sacks. But he does not think he will get much help from his nephew — Libby's son, Jonathan.

Although a good family member, Jonathan is simply too busy as Chief Rabbi to pop in on a regular basis.

Jewish Chronicle, 1994

Some personal memories – by Brian Sacks

My father's woollens and worsteds materials shop, at 275, Commercial Road, was a short walk away from Frumkin's Wines, at 162, Commercial Road. So when I or my brothers would spend a working day with my father, we would spend part of the time at the wine shop. In my case, these visits were in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Frumkin's Wines was a very enticing place for a young child. I would be welcomed by my grandmother Rachel (to me she was, of course, Booba Frumkin) and by Uncle Mayer (Rev. Mayer Frydman) or Uncle Wilfred (Goldberg). Benny was also there to

The Story of Frumkin's Wines

greet me; he was always cheerful, was tall and slim and vaguely reminded me of the Shadows guitarist Hank Marvin. Fairly soon after arrival I would ask for, and receive, a small Britvic bottle of pineapple juice.

Health & Safety was not so rigidly enforced in those days, and I remember a lift shaft that, to my eyes, was an awe-inspiring chasm to be treated with respect from a safe distance. But I was free to roam around upstairs or in the basement, gathering wine labels for my collection. The barrels of wines and spirits were all downstairs, so the smells of damp wood and liquor added to the sense of adventure as I climbed down into the dark.

In describing what Frumkin's Wines meant to me as a child, I must not overlook their colourful and evocative wine and spirit labels.

My thanks go to Lionel Frumkin for the information that the labels were printed by Ormerods, the still-operating "Print specialists since 1879". Gracing the Shabbat dinner table from my earliest childhood, at a time when travel to Israel was beyond any realistic expectations, it was the Frumkin's wine labels that shaped my imagination



of the country; a land of wide plains, placid lakes and rolling hills, of serene camels and serene sunsets, of neatly sown fields extending into the distance beneath blue skies.

The Story of Frumkin's Wines

In the summer of 1970, when I was 18, Uncle Mayer was kind enough to employ me at the Commercial Road shop for two or three weeks at a rate of twelve pounds per week. I remember that the most popular item was VP Wine at eleven shillings and sixpence, appealing to a clientele possibly somewhat downmarket from that drawn in by the West End branch. Next in popularity was Johnny Walker Red Label whisky, at fifty shillings and eleven pence.

Thus I was lucky enough to work in the East End branch in its final year of operation, and to man the cash register in the final year of pounds, shillings and pence. That short spell of employment enabled me to fund my first independent holiday abroad, before moving out of home (during term time) to embark on my student career. For me, life was opening up, but for Frumkin's in London's East End, an era extending back more than three quarters of a century was gently slipping into history.



*It used to be called Frumkins Corner..
162 Commercial Road in the 21st Century*