

DAVID BOGEN (1889-1974)

This is the 20th installment of our series documenting Industry Pioneers.

BY R. DAVID READ

David Bogen's life offers an enduring story of a young Russian Jewish immigrant who, by working hard and applying himself diligently, founded and guided a company that, to this day, is a leading supplier to the sound and communications industry.

David Bogen was born in a small village some 200 miles from Kiev, Russia. Although, at times, he left listeners with the impression that his small village would have made an excellent backdrop for a scene from *Fiddler on the Roof*, he and his family were not an impoverished group of peasants. His father and grandfather owned property, operated a milling company and were, considering their times and circumstances, actually rather well off.

According to his son,¹ young David was able to acquire what would be equivalent to a high school education, and there was enough money to afford lessons to learn to read, write and converse in English. Seemingly, he chafed under the strict religious attitude of his elders and the stifling climate of the Czar's authority. His ambition and the desire to put his English language skills to work led him to seek the more cosmopolitan enclave of Kiev. In that larger city, he was able to gain employment as a tutor, and his services were well received and rewarded.

His brother, Israel, who was six years younger, recalled that David attended his Bar Mitzvah in 1909 just prior to David's departure to immigrate to the US.

Making His Way

Bogen debarked from his ocean passage to the US in Galveston TX. With no relatives or friends in this strange new land, he was utterly de-



Bogen Family Archives

David Bogen

Contributing Editor R. David Read, an avid historian, authors Sound & Communications' popular "Industry Pioneer" series.

pendent on his own abilities. Although he spoke English with a distinct accent, his familiarity with the language was a decided asset. For the next two years, he roamed the southern tier of states and then back eastward through the northern states.

Working at odd jobs, Bogen would stay in one place long enough to pay his keep and accumulate enough money to move onward. He often related that two of the jobs he found most interesting were as a iron worker in New Orleans, where he was engaged in fabricating the wrought-iron balcony railings and decorative gates that adorned the mansions in that city. He also found life as a section hand (track worker) on the Rock Island Railroad a fascinating experience. Although small in stature, Bogen was a wiry, physically adept individual who could hold his own with his rough and tumble fellow workers.

Furthering His Education

After having seen a fair amount of his adopted country, he settled down in New York City and took a job with Consolidated Edison, the local electrical utility company. The nature of his work for Con Ed is not revealed; however, whatever the position, he was elevated to the rank of a foreman. Smitten with an interest in electricity, he decided to pursue a career in electrical engineering. With no money other than his wages from Con Ed, his choices as to how he would further his education were severely limited.

Cooper Union appeared to be his best and, perhaps his only, option. That institution offered a tuition free, accredited course of study, for qualified applicants, merely for the asking. Attending full time, the required curriculum would take four years; this, of course, was out of the question. This

was a time when an eight-hour-a-day, five-day work week was not the established norm; and he was still faced with the need to make a living wage. The second alternative was to attend evening classes. That course of action would require attending classes for seven years; young Bogen took this approach.

Living in Brooklyn NY, he would commute via subway and streetcar to his 10-plus hour a day job at Con Ed; then make his way to Cooper Union on lower 14th Street in Manhattan to attend his evening courses. He related that "his sleeping time was often accomplished on the NYC transit system."²

After seven long years of study, he gained his baccalaureate in Electrical Engineering. One can only imagine his dismay when, in those rampant anti-Semitic days, he was refused employ-



Members of the David Bogen Company were feted for their contribution to the US war effort at a dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria, circa 1946.

ment at any of the large companies he approached, solely on the basis of his Jewish heritage. Nevertheless, he was always grateful to Cooper Union for his education, was justifiably proud of his EE degree and, in later years, was a solid supporter of his alma mater.

An Entrepreneurial Spirit

Despite circumstances that might have crushed a lesser individual, he pressed forward and vowed never again work for anyone other than himself. Tapping the meager savings he had accumulated as an employee of Con Ed, he began producing small cast metal images of the Statue of Liberty, which were in demand as souvenirs of NYC. Revenues were adequate to keep him afloat.

Having finished Cooper Union in 1918, he was on the threshold to witness the immense surge of activity that swept the radio industry as consumers embraced this new technology. He abandoned his Statue of Liberty production and shifted his interest to the emerging field of electrical and electronic parts distribution.

As we have seen from previous accountings of such noteworthy individuals as Sidney Shure (*Sound & Communications*, October 2006), Al Kahn (*Sound & Communications*, March 2004), E.N. Rauland (*Sound & Communications*, April/June 2007) and J.B. Lansing (*Sound & Communications*, October/November 2007), the 1920s gave promise of handsome profits to those willing to risk their time and capital to serve this emerging industry. In rather short order, Bogen created a profitable distribution company serving that marketplace.

A turning point occurred when he received an order for a substantial number of audio amplifiers. At the time, the only significant manufacturer of such

devices was Western Electric. Western Electric resolutely refused to sell products to "third-party" distributors. Bogen sensed an opportunity and tooled up to provide such equipment to a growing number of potential customers.

By 1932, the David Bogen Company transformed itself from being a distributor into the role of a manufacturer, and started churning out audio amplifiers and other audio products, much to the chagrin of Western Electric, which always considered him an "inferior usurper" in this regard. Western Electric and its counterparts at RCA were much too engrossed in their cinema activities, and considered "commercial sound" much too mundane for any serious consideration.

Aspersions aside, the David Bogen Company created products that appealed to the commercial sector of the industry. 1932 was not exactly the best possible economic climate to launch a new company; however, the David Bogen Company prospered.

Venturing Into Recording

A holdover from his distributing days was a line of variable-speed phonograph players. These were used by dance teachers and square dance callers who needed players that would accommodate the then in-use 16-inch transcription discs, and that could change speed in order to vary the rhythm. This was indeed a rather specialized market and was dominated by one domestic supplier. Electric motors for such devices were scarce and relatively expensive. When his supplier significantly ramped up their prices, Bogen went looking for an alternative source.

As chance would have it, Bogen had made the acquaintance of Harry Meyers, who held controlling interest in the Carl Fisher Musical Instrument Company. Meyers' agent in Europe was



Bogen Communications, Inc.

An early (circa late-1930s?) version of some intercom apparatus.

Charlie Liebi, who was responsible for seeking out suppliers of musical instruments for import into the US. Bogen, having been introduced previously to Liebi, thought Charlie's knowledge of European manufacturing might prove useful in solving his recording apparatus dilemma. With Meyers' approval, Bogen contacted Liebi and engaged him as his agent in Europe. It proved to be a quite satisfactory relationship.

In short order, Liebi cabled Bogen that he had located a small machine shop in Burgdorf near Bern, Switzerland, that might meet the criteria for providing the variable speed recording/playback apparatus that Bogen was seeking. Based on Liebi's reports, Bogen was intrigued and booked passage for the trans-Atlantic voyage. What he found when he met with the Laeng family in Bern was an entirely satisfactory mechanical apparatus that served the purpose and that was considerably less expensive than the devices being offered by his previous domestic supplier. The downside was that the Laeng machine shop was just that: a shop and not a production facility.

Created Bogen-Presto

Bogen and Liebi arranged a series of meetings with the town fathers of Burgdorf. Despite the two men's almost utter incomprehension of "Switzerdeutsch," by using Charlie's considerable amount of salesmanship and David's mien, a deal was struck. In

Contemporary shot of today's Bogen Communications International Inc.'s premises in Ramsey NJ.



For many years, the David Bogen Company was ensconced in this building on East 23rd Street in downtown Manhattan.



The David Bogen Company was an early contributor to the hi-fi craze that swept the US in the 1950s.

Hi-Fi Era

Never one to miss a promising opportunity, by 1949, David Bogen geared up to provide product to the emerging consumer demand for enhanced playback apparatus. Although the company shied away from loudspeaker transducer engineering or production, its electronic products were well received in the marketplace. Lester was placed in the position of overseeing this aspect of the company's activities, a position he accepted with some reluctance.

As an illustration of just how tight-knit the industry was and how, in the early days, various members of the AV industry worked so closely together and were mutually involved in the fostering and betterment of the industry, we might examine the relationship between the David Bogen Company and industry giant Sidney Harman (see sidebar, "Sidney Harman, (1918-)," page 71).

exchange for a sustaining order for product and some financial assistance in tooling up for production, the town elders agreed to provide suitable factory space to support the enterprise. Hence, Lenco AG was founded. In the US, a Bogen subsidiary—Bogen-Presto—was incorporated to handle the import and distribution of recording apparatus.

The exact date of this transaction has been lost, but it can be surmised that this all occurred sometime in 1935-36. Lenco AG also contributed significantly in the development of telephone-style intercom systems that formed the base for Bogen's entry into the office and institutional intercom market.

Like practically every industry in the United States, the David Bogen Company geared up to provide materials for the war effort. Commercial sales shrank to practically nothing and the US military became its largest customer.

His young son (Lester Bogen, 1922-1988), whom David was grooming as his successor and who was already an active member of the David Bogen Company, marched off to war as an officer in the Army.

Sound & Communications Relationship

During the early 1950s, Jerome Brookman, who would go on to found *Sound Merchandising Magazine*, which later morphed into *Sound & Communications Magazine*, was an ad salesman working for an electrical product "jobbers" magazine. In that capacity, covering the Eastern seaboard, he called on potential accounts such as the David Bogen Company and others in the audio manufacturing business. Brookman recalled that "David Bogen and some of the others in that segment of the industry repeatedly told me that the magazine I represented was not 'reaching' the segment of the industry that might be interested in buying their audio products."⁴

Brookman heeded their advice and, in 1955, started what eventually would become the magazine that you now hold in your hands. He was always eternally grateful that his initial solicitation for subscribers was based on David Bogen's list of distributors.

Company's Legacy

Lester, from his high school days, had always displayed an interest in artistic rather than engineering aspects, and showed an early affinity for photography. He took his leave of his father's company and founded Bogen Photography, a company that concentrated on the development and manufacturing of tripods, camera head mountings and sundry accessories for the photographic industry.

Consequently, by 1955, David Bogen, nearing retirement age with no heir apparent and facing onerous inheritance taxes, elected to sell his company.

As can be seen from the accompanying table, Bogen Communications: Company Timeline, after David's de-

Sidney Harman (1918 -)

Born in Montreal, Canada, in 1918, Sidney Harman received a degree in physics from City College of New York and, in 1939, took an engineering job in New York with the David Bogen Company, where he helped design public-address systems. After 14 years, he was elevated to general manager of the firm.

He had a wife, four children and a home in the Forest Hills section of Queens NY. He loved reading, boxing, tennis and music. At night, he liked to play records. He used a transcription turntable borrowed from a radio station, a modified Bogen amplifier and a big tri-axial speaker. Sometimes, Bernard Kardon, chief engineer at Bogen, joined him, and the two cranked up the sound on Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony until the walls rattled.

In 1953, Harman and Kardon gave up their salaries and left Bogen to form their own company, dedicated to producing hi-fi equipment. Each put in \$5000. They set up a plant in lower Manhattan, where they manufactured a line of high-quality amplifiers and receivers for the Radio Shack chain under the name Realist (later changed to Realistic) and then their own line under the name Harman-Kardon.³

Harman-Kardon prospered with the development of the first integrated AM/FM tuner and audio amplifier. In 1969, the company entered the professional audio business with the acquisition of JBL.



Sidney Harman, circa 1950s.

parture, the company passed through several corporate reorganizations.

Today, Bogen Communications, Inc., is a highly respected, multimillion dollar manufacturer of sound and communications products serving the commercial, institutional and fixed installation/touring sound markets. And, it all started with a little guy casting bronze figures of the Statue of Liberty in his modest apartment in Brooklyn NY. ■

References

¹ Bogen, Lester. *Memoirs of My Father*, unpublished family journal

² Bogen, Lester *Ibid*

³ Bacas Harry, *Nations Business*, October 1988

⁴ Brookman, Jerome, conversations with the author

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| BOGEN COMMUNICATIONS: COMPANY TIMELINE | |
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| Date | Event |
| 1909 | David Bogen immigrates to the US |
| 1918 | Bogen is graduated from Cooper Union with an EE degree |
| 1923 | Bogen Distribution company founded |
| 1932 | David Bogen Company formed as a manufacturing enterprise |
| 1935 | Bogen-Presto Recording Company formed |
| 1956 | Company acquired by Unitronics. David Bogen Company and Bogen-Presto combined. Offices and manufacturing relocated to Paramus NJ |
| 1957 | Unitronics acquired by Siegler Corporation |
| 1962 | Siegler merges with aerospace manufacturer Lear and becomes Lear-Siegler, Inc. The Presto name is dropped and the company is renamed: Bogen Communications Division of LSI |
| 1987 | Bogen acquired by Memory Protection Devices. Company is relocated to Ramsey NJ |
| 1990 | Bogen Communications, Inc., is spun off from Memory Protection Devices |
| 1999 | Bogen Communications, Inc., acquires loudspeaker manufacturing company Apogee Sound International |

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