

When Jennie Came to America

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My mother, Jennie Mollie Tenenbaum Pollack, was born on March 24, 1907 in Belzic, Poland. This is near Lublin, Poland and near the Majdanek concentration camp. The town name translates into English as Belgitz. Her parents were Max Tenenbaum and Sarah Braindel Kellerstein Tenenbaum. She was their first child.



Soon after she was born my grandfather, Max Tenenbaum, immigrated to the United States to start a new and better life for his family in the New World. He left my grandmother and my mother behind in Poland, planning to send for them once he was established. It was common in those days to do so. He settled in New York City, on the lower East side of Manhattan, where he probably had friends and relatives to help him.

In Poland, he had been a bookbinder in a time when many books were bound in leather. He had also been exposed to the tanning industry where animals' hides were tanned to make leather. In later life when he developed tuberculosis, we thought that he may have contracted silicosis working with tanning leather in Poland and the silicosis later developed into tuberculosis.

In New York, he got a job in the women's clothing industry and joined the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, The ILGWU.

The following family story has been told so many times that it even has a name: "When Jennie Came to America" (In Yiddish: "Venn Charnele is gekimmen kain America"). My mother's Hebrew name is Charna Martel.

When my mother was about 3 years old, her father sent for her and my grandmother to join him in New York. They came by ship and when he met them my mother did not recognize her own father since she had been so young when he had left Poland. My grandfather was always a dapper dresser. I remember him wearing a 3-piece suit with grey vest and grey spats and a derby hat. Most likely he was dressed like that when he went to pick up his wife and daughter. In my mother's limited experience, in Poland, the only men who dressed like that were the doctors and she assumed he was a doctor and was terrified of him and cried and would not allow herself to be picked up by him. However, my grandfather, perhaps anticipating such a reaction, came bearing gifts, namely a new red coat and hat. My 3-year-old mother, realizing

that it was unlikely that the doctor had bought her a new coat and hat, began to trust that this was really her father.

They settled into an apartment on Houston Street on the lower east side of Manhattan. Houston is pronounced house-ton, not like the city in Texas by the same name.

Soon after, my grandmother became pregnant and had a son, Murray, who we called Moishie since his Hebrew name was Moshe.

My grandfather joined with some of the other people who had emigrated from his hometown in Poland to form a "society," the First Belgitzer Benefit Society. They bought cemetery plots at Riverside Cemetery in Saddle Brook, New Jersey. My grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles are buried there. The entrance to the area where they are buried is through a metal arch that has the inscription, in Yiddish, of the First (Ershter, in Yiddish) Belgitzer Benefit Society. The Society probably also provided other benefits but I do not know what they were. I do know that they would meet regularly at different member's houses and at one point my father, Herman, who was born in the United States and had no connection to Poland, was their secretary.

I know little about my mother's early life in New York. I believe she left school at 16 and got a job as a bookkeeper. She studied shorthand and typing in school and at one time tried to teach me Gregg shorthand. She worked in an office and her boss was a man named Al Wiesner. I believe some of her close girlfriends also worked there because I recall them reminiscing about their days working there. One of the stories they told was that Al Wiesner had the inside of the windows in the office painted black so that his employees would not be distracted from their work by looking out of the windows.

My mother also told the story that soon after she started working and earning money of her own, her brother, Murray asked her to buy him his first pair of long pants and she did. In those days, younger boys wore knickers rather than long pants. What she did not know was that he wanted those long pants so that he could be admitted to a pool parlor and play pool. The pool parlor, in an effort to avoid "corrupting young boys" required that their customers were old enough to wear long pants. Thus, my mother inadvertently contributed to the "delinquency" of her brother.