

My Mother Had Twelve Children

On my birth certificate for October 26, 1915 there is the question: "Number of previous children?" The entry in answer to that question is "nine". That would make me number ten. I know there were two births after me, making a total of twelve. There is another question on the next line, "How many now living (in all)?" The answer to that is shown as six. These would be Hilda, Lily, Max, Molly, Harry and me.

Four years later the 1920 United States Census lists the following names for our family: Lily, Max, Molly, Harry, Abraham, Frances (Fanny, age two years, two months) and David, (age six months): seven names in all. Not shown was my older sister Hilda who had married and was no longer living with our family. My predecessor Abby (Abraham), named after my grandfather, died of Scarlet Fever in 1913. When I came along in 1915, I was named after the same grandfather. All told, there are a total of nine names; eight of them alive in 1920, seven at home and one married, living away from home.

The 1920 census also tells us that my father Elias immigrated to the U.S. in 1904. My mother Anna and sisters Hilda and Lily came in 1906. After coming to the US, my parents had seven more children: Max, (1907); Abby (1909); Mildred (Molly, 1910); Harry (1912); Abraham (1915); Frances (Fanny, 1917) and David (1919). This confirms nine names, conflicting with the derived total of twelve. Three names are missing.

Why did my father come in 1904 and leave behind my mother and two sisters, who arrived in 1906? The story about this, retold among my siblings and many cousins, aunts

and uncles, was that my father, Elias, had to make a quick get-a-way because he was being sought by the local police. There had been a pogrom by Polish ruffians in Burstyn (Burshtein), where my family lived. This was in Galicia, a Polish speaking area, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. At that time, pogroms were endemic and regularly visited upon the Jewish population. During this particular episode my father's sister, Molly, was dragged behind a wagon and severely injured. Shortly thereafter, the story goes, there was a battle between some young Jewish men and the Polish perpetrators, during which one of the Poles was killed. As a result, the police were seeking my father, who went into hiding. Somehow he managed to get to a port on the Atlantic, and wound up at Ellis Island. At the time, there were numerous relatives who had previously emigrated to the Lower East Side of Manhattan, who welcomed my father when he arrived.

The subject of the "missing" children was never discussed with me by my mother, Anna. She was not likely to talk to male children about such a subject, but she did discuss it with my sisters. My younger sister Frances told me that our mother related to her that she had lost her first three children through miscarriage or at birth. It is not uncommon for mothers to include failed pregnancies in their total of children. I know of one person whose grandmother said she had thirteen children, including six failed births. I distinctly remember on occasion, at twilight, my mother sitting quietly and softly entreating the Master of the Universe (in Yiddish 'riboneh shel olam') to bless the souls of the children she had lost. At the time, she would have been thinking of three children (all girls, according to sister Frances) who were lost at birth in Burstyn, as well as my namesake

brother, Abby, who died of Scarlet Fever in 1913, and my brother David, who was born with some defect in 1919 and died at the age of six. Also, she would include my older sister Hilda, who died during the failed birth of her second child in 1923. I took no particular notice of my mother's supplications because I was not concerned with such matters in my childhood. Nor did I ever talk about it with my father; he was usually taciturn and consumed with the burden of trying to support a large family with his meager earnings.

A historical note: The Immigration Act of 1924 was, in part, a response to the census of 1920, which tended to highlight the immigration to America of more than two and one half million Jews from Eastern Europe between 1881 and 1924. This was an annual average of some 60,000. The impetus for this huge stream over the 43 year period was the ongoing persecution and lack of economic opportunity. The 1924 Act resulted in national quotas which prevented immigration of many Jews who might otherwise have escaped the Nazi Holocaust. For example, the national yearly quota for Poland, where many Jews lived, was set at 5,982 in 1925-1927. Others from Southern and Eastern Europe were also restricted. Examples: Italy 3,845 and Russia 2,248. On the other hand, quotas for Germany were 51,227, Great Britain 34,007 and Ireland, 28, 567.

Attached is a reduced size copy of the page of the "Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 Population" which covers my family. For those who can discern the rich content of the voluminous entries on 50 lines with 29 columns (perhaps with a magnifying glass) will find items reflecting interesting social conditions. For example,

there are nine families listed on the page, six Jewish and three Italian. All heads of household were male (fathers). The occupations listed for them were: Chauffeur, Peddler, Cigar Maker, Steam RR Conductor, Butcher, Picture Mounting Frammer, Bricklayer, Presser of Cloaks, and Barber. The Enumerator was Dennis Shea, who wrote his entries in a clear script, easy to read. I can readily guess he was Irish, no doubt appointed by Tammany Hall, a politically powerful organization in New York City, sort of like Hezbollah without the arms. Tammany used to dispense turkeys for Thanksgiving, find jobs and do all sorts of other favors to retain their political influence.

I clearly remember our neighbor Sarah Slater who is listed in the census. When my mother had to be absent one day, we were put in her care. She was delighted to have us for breakfast. I still recall the wafting aroma of scrambled eggs and bagels which she served, while speaking to us in Yiddish with a Litvak accent. We understood every word, even though we spoke Yiddish with a Galitzianer accent.

I am grateful today that, because of my father's miraculous escape to America, I had the good fortune to be born in the U.S. I have attached a copy of my "Certificate and Record of Birth".