

Elie Jacques Tennenbaum

Photographed with his wife Stella

Wartime Experience: Fled to Shanghai

Name: Elie Jacques Tennenbaum

Date and place of birth: Cracow, (Krakow), Poland July 7, 1917

Name at birth: Eliaszk Jakob

Names and profession of parents:

Father: Leon Tennenbaum – House painter

Mother: Rose Stern – Hair stylist and wig maker

Siblings: none

Names of spouse and children and grandchildren:

Wife: Stella Tennenbaum, M.D.

Daughter and Son-in-law: Vallery Rose Feldman, Marc Feldman

Son and daughter-in-law: Daniel Lee Tennenbaum, Iris Joy Kotovsky

Grandchildren: Michael Jacob and Benjamin Aaron

Life previous to World War II

I always felt that I was born on a memorable day, July 7, 1917. I was born at home on the seventh day of the seventh month, on the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, at 7:00 PM. According to the Hebrew calendar, the date is the seventeenth day of the month of Tamuz, 5,677.

At the time, Krakow was under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. A year later Krakow became again a Polish city when Poland was re-united under the leadership of Marshal Jozef Pilsudski.

Krakow is a beautiful city and for many years was a great center of Jewish learning. Krakow had a vibrant Jewish community even though the Poles were virulently anti-Semitic. There were a lot of restrictions concerning what Jews could or could not do, or what professions they could study for, etc.

I had a very happy childhood. I was very fond of my parents and even though I was an only child I had lots of uncles and aunts, with whom I and my parents would get together frequently. I attended a regular grammar school for a year or two, but when it became clear that the education I was receiving wasn't very good my parents enrolled me in a Jewish day school. I grew up speaking several languages, Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew. I took private French lessons from a lady who lived in the same apartment building as I did, and later added Russian, German, English and Spanish. My gift for languages came in handy and I used all of them frequently throughout my life.

I was raised as an Orthodox Jew. In Poland at that time one was either a religious Catholic or a religious Jew. There were no reform branches of the religions as there are today. From Judaism I got a love of studying and learning which was always important to me. I loved celebrating the Jewish holidays. (Actually I loved to celebrate any occasion.)

I managed to get along with the Poles and the Polish students would tell me when they would be planning anything against the Jewish students. I could warn the other Jewish students that something bad was going to happen on a certain day and usually this meant the Jewish students would stay home from school. I lived in Krakow until my departure to France on February 20, 1938.

Location and situation during the war.

I always credited my aunt Hanka Spitz, (a sister of my father) for becoming a doctor. Jews in Poland were not allowed to study medicine. So originally, I was a pharmacy student in Krakow. Hanka, who lived in Paris with her husband Leon, suggested that since I really wanted to study medicine I should come to Paris. That is what I did and the move probably saved my life because if I had stayed in Poland I would undoubtedly have died with my parents in the concentration camps.

While studying in Paris I supported myself by giving language lessons, acting as a tour guide and doing anything else I could to make a living. I was given some help by my two uncles Leon Spitz and Jacques Tennenbaum.

After the Nazis occupied Paris, I was no longer able to continue my studies. I was able to get a boat from Marseilles and emigrate to Shanghai, China in 1939. Shanghai was a free port and was accepting refugees. I studied at the Aurora University, which was run by the Jesuits. Instruction was in French. In Shanghai I lived in a house owned by a Mr. Goldberg. Shanghai was under Japanese occupation during the war. And I was fortunate that I was able to get a dispensation from the occupying Japanese from living in Hongkui. This was a ghetto set up by the Japanese and all foreigners had to live there.

I met my future wife, Stella, in the medical school in Shanghai. She was in the class a year below me. I obtained my medical degree in 1945 and then worked in the Shanghai Refugee Hospital. I was there until January 1948 when I was able to come to the United States on the boat the Marine Swallow.

At that time, the United States used a quota system for refugees: a certain number of people from each country were allowed per year. Stella had arrived in San Francisco six months earlier on the Czech quota and then tried to get me out. I was finally able to come to the United States in January 1948.

Life after the War

Stella and I married on April 17, 1948. We went to the San Francisco City Hall to get the license on April 17 so we would have it before the religious wedding on April 20. At that time there were "marrying judges" who, for a small consideration, would marry a couple immediately after they bought the license. We took advantage of this and so we always celebrated two anniversaries - on April 17 and 20. The Jewish wedding was arranged by our new friends the Shoenlanks whom Stella had met after she emigrated to the United States. It took place at Temple Anshe Sfard.

I was able to get an internship at Mary's Help (now Seton Hospital) in San Francisco. Originally, I had hoped to do my internship at Mt. Zion Hospital but even though it was "the Jewish Hospital" the administrators were very unfriendly to Jewish refugees. That's is why I had to go elsewhere for my internship. The United States and China had reciprocity which meant that the Medical degrees of Stella and me from China were accepted in the US. This was very fortunate. Otherwise we would have been forced to repeat medical school. Reciprocity meant that I needed to do a year of internship and pass the medical State Board for accreditation to practice in the US. When I arrived in the United States, my knowledge of English was minimal. However my ability to learn languages came in handy. I was able to study and pass a very difficult test which was in essay form, not multiple choice as it is today.

After getting my license I opened up a private practice in General Medicine in the Mission District in San Francisco. Then, about a year later, I moved to the Phelan building on Market Street. At that time it was a major medical building in the city. I was on the staff of Mt. Zion Hospital for over thirty years. My patients came from all over the world. I learned Spanish as my final language because I had many Latino patients. Because I spoke so many languages I often would help translate at the hospital when needed.

I was always very interested in arts and crafts. For the weddings of both of my children, Vallery and Dan, I created original Ketubot (Jewish wedding contracts). They were hand lettered on parchment. I also made a wooden cradle for the birth of my first grandchild, Michael in 1989.

Gardening was another love. We had a cabin at Clear Lake, California and in the garden I tried to plant as many trees that are listed in the Old Testament as possible. The trees grew well and provided fruit for many years.

I was always civic minded and worked to preserve the natural beauty of the neighborhood. This meant convincing the San Francisco City Supervisors to buy the rock formation directly across the street from my house on 14th Avenue as Open Space so it wouldn't be built on.

I was very involved with Synagogue Ner Tamid in San Francisco. I helped out with the children's programs in preparations for the holidays and anything else where I might be of use to the temple.

The Jewish holidays were very important to me. For Purim I made costumes for my son Dan and daughter Vallery. We would visit friends delivering "Shalakmonas". (Gifts of dried fruit, nuts, sometimes pastry given at Purim.) At night, I read the Megilla of Esther and we would make noise at the mention of Hamen's name. Passover, Sukkot and Hanukkah were major events. Before Passover we would go through the house looking for bread and then burn it symbolically in the back yard. Seders were always joyous affairs. Sometimes there were as many as twenty-two guests. I lead the service but everyone got a chance to participate. We would also sing all the songs. Stella prepared wonderful food. The special treat, for which we waited all year, was her Polish Carp. She prepared this dish for Passover and Rosh Hashanah and everyone always asked for more. For Sukkoth we built a sukkah in the back yard and we would make decorations and hang fruit inside it. The roof was made with pine branches so it smelled very inviting. We would have lunches in the sukkah throughout the holiday. Hanukkah meant the whole house was decorated. Stella prepared a feast for a large party which included plenty of latkes. Everyone would sing songs, open presents and often we played dreidel until one or two in the morning.

My greatest joy is my family. I know my parents would be happy to see the life I made here in America.