

Stella Tennenbaum

Photographed with her husband Elie Jacques

Wartime Experience: Fled to Shanghai

Name: Stella Tennenbaum, M.D.

Date and place of birth: Moravska-Ostrava (Mährisch-Ostrau), Czechoslovakia (Czech Republic)
December 28, 1916

Maiden name: Reich

Names and profession of parents:

Father: Jacob Reich – merchant, imported wholesale watches from Switzerland and custom jewelry from Germany. His territory was Moravia and Slovakia. He sold to retailers.

Mother: Valerie Ackerman – merchant, she worked in the store and did the buying and selling

Sibling: Sister – Edita Stevenson living in England; Husband – Jenda Stevenson, Ph.D.

Son and daughter-in-law: Peter Stevenson and Annie Broadly

Names of spouse and children and grandchildren:

Husband: Elie J. Tennenbaum, M.D.

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

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

Grandchildren: Michael Jacob and Benjamin Aaron Tennenbaum

Life previous to World War II

I grew up in a benign and friendly country where anti-Semitism was not much in evidence. In fact, I never experienced it growing up. Czechoslovakia had only recently in 1916 become an independent country. Previously it had been part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. My hometown has both a Czech name and German name. It is a coal mining town, near the German-Poland border, in the province of Moravia.

I lived a comfortable life as a fairly assimilated Jew and had no desire to emigrate. My parents were successful business people. They owned a wholesale store and imported watches and jewelry. Both of my parents worked in the store. My goal in life was to study and become an architect. However, my father insisted that I become a physician. I also assumed that I would marry and stay in Czechoslovakia. My primary languages were German and Czech. Studying was a passion for me. I also studied French and English in school and in addition took private lessons in colloquial French, which turned out to be prescient as well as useful. After passing my Baccalaureate in 1934 I started studying medicine at the German University in Prague, 1934-1938. There was also a Czech University in Prague. Along with my studies I was also involved in sports such as fencing, skiing and gymnastics.

By this time it was the late '30s and things were getting difficult for Jews. The Germans occupied Czechoslovakia March 15, 1939. This was prior to the official start of the war on September 1, 1939. The Germans no longer permitted me to study. I realized that I would have

to emigrate. To prepare myself for leaving I took a course in pedicures and massage privately and also worked in a hospital for single and abused mothers to learn infant care. The Germans confiscated my parents' store and they moved to an apartment in Prague.

My sister Edita had been able to emigrate to England with her husband and they began a long effort to get me to England. Nothing went right. Papers were lost, permits weren't given and, in the end, getting to England became impossible because of the outbreak of the war. One day I met a friend from Mährisch-Ostrau who told me about a ship that was sponsored by the JOINT, (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee), an aid organization which at the beginning and throughout the war tried to help Jews in Eastern Europe). The ship, "Conte Rosso," run by the Italian line Lloyd Triestino, left from Genoa and Venice alternately on a monthly basis, bound for Shanghai. The ticket cost 120,000 Czech kroner or \$4,000. My parents immediately bought me a ticket. I had to go to the Gestapo in Prague for an exit visa but at that time did not encounter any difficulties. I went to Genoa to wait for the boat. Originally my parents were supposed to join me but in spite of their efforts they were not allowed to obtain the necessary papers to emigrate and finally they told me to go on ahead to Shanghai and, hopefully, they could follow later. I left in the Spring of 1940, a few months after war had been declared in Europe on the next to last boat to leave Italy.

The boat trip took one month. I was not allowed to get off at most ports such as Suez or India as they were under British control. The British treated me as a German because Italy under Mussolini had declared war on England. I was able to get off for a day in Manila which I remember as being a beautiful city. On board the ship I met a man who was to become a life-long friend, Ludwig Bloch, who was born deaf and mute but nevertheless had become an accomplished artist. He was escaping from Germany. I shared a cabin with an English lady, Mrs. Carter, who later proved to be very helpful. Another Czech couple I was friendly with was the Tutsches who were also escaping.

Location and situation during the war.

At the dock in Shanghai, I was met by the secretary of a man, Mr. Bitker, who had the same type of business my parents did. In order to be allowed to land in Shanghai I had to prove that I had enough money with me so I would not be a burden to the residents of the city. The secretary of Mr. Bitker also helped me find lodging in the city.

I tried to get admitted to the various universities in Shanghai but to no avail. I had all my papers documenting my schooling. Then one day I again met Mrs. Carter who told me to speak to her daughter, Muriel, who ran the beauty salon in the Palace Hotel. This was a very high-class establishment catering to the English and American residents of the city. I was able to have a space there to do pedicures and massage. I enjoyed my work very much and came into contact with many interesting people. Through my clients, I met a non-Jewish couple, the Schoenauers, who had built a house on the outskirts of Shanghai. Mr. Otto Schoenauer was an engineer.

Shanghai at that time was a vibrant, exciting and what today we would call a multicultural city. People came from all over the world to live and to do business there. There were many immigrants from Russia who fled due to the Russian revolution who were able to begin anew in the city. At the Schoenaur's, I met a female professor of bacteriology named Mankiewitz, from the French Catholic University. She was appalled that I was not allowed to study and introduced me to Father Gaultier who was the Chancellor of the Aurora University in the French Concession section of Shanghai. This was a university run by French Jesuits. He admitted me in 1943. Fortunately, I was able to enter at the fourth year and did not have to repeat my entire schooling. My parents had money in Switzerland and were able, through Mr. Bitker, to give me an allowance of ten American dollars a month. With this amount I was able to live well and did not have to work while I studied.

I was one the very few foreigners studying at the Aurora University. It was a very rigorous course of study. Every Saturday, bombs or no bombs, we had a written test. Still, it was gratifying to be doing what I wanted to do. Professor Mankiewitz asked me if I had met "Le Petit Polonais" (the small Pole). One day I saw a young man in the library with a small backpack and a loaf of bread. He took a nap for twenty minutes and then continued to study. He was "le Petit Polonais", which was the professor's pet name for him since he was actually six feet tall, not small at all. Actual name, Elie Tennenbaum. It turned out that Elie and I had the anatomy lab together and also worked together in the morning in the hospital. We got to know each other and he actually proposed in Shanghai although we did not marry there.

I lived in a pension near the university run by a French woman named Mlle. Maestre. I was able to stay there even after the Japanese occupied China and did not have to relocate to Hongkew. Hongkew was the ghetto into which the Japanese forced all the Central Europeans to live after the occupation. I did, however, have to report to a Japanese official every six months for renewal of my permit to live in the city. I remember these officials as being of very low class and coarse individuals, not the best of Japanese society. I was able to receive some letters from my parents before the Japanese occupation. Afterwards I heard nothing until the Swiss notified me that my parents had perished in Auschwitz. I was devastated. News of what was happening in the outside world was difficult to get. Friends of mine with short-wave radios were able to be kept up to date and told me that if I knew what was happening I would be appalled. After my graduation in 1946 when I obtained my medical degree, I worked for a short time at the Shanghai Refugee Hospital in Hongkew.

After the war

Mao took over China and all the refugees were forced to find other countries very quickly. I was able to come to the United States. I was one of the first to be able to leave because there were few Czech immigrants for the Czech quota. Elie came in January 1948 on a student visa obtained for him by me. Again the JOINT paid for me to come and paid for a room in a hotel in San Francisco. Originally I was sponsored to go to New York, but fortunately, I met a nurse, Josephine, who convinced me to stay in San Francisco.

I noticed a sign at the local Jewish Community Center announcing a get-together for newcomers. And thought that "if they are giving a party for the newcomers I should attend." There I met a Mrs. Schoenlank who took a liking to me and later my husband. We became very close friends. They were a home away from home. She introduced me to another lady, Mrs. Shepherd whose family also became equally close to me.

During my stay in Shanghai I made many friends among the refugees there and, after they came to the United States, we continued the friendships. Sadly, many of these people are now dead. The students from the Aurora University formed an alumni association and a few years ago, in San Francisco at a reunion, I was able to meet again some of the people I had studied with.

I tried to continue my medical career. I was able to get reciprocity for my medical degree from China. I also tried to get an internship at Mt. Zion Hospital where I was very rudely turned down. Women doctors were not common at that time. It was still very much a man's profession. I looked through the telephone book for hospitals and was able to get an internship at the Southern Pacific Hospital in San Francisco. This was the hospital of the Southern Pacific Railroad. The hospital was short staffed due to the war and the remaining doctors were delighted to have another intern. Since there were no quarters for female doctors I lived in the nurses' quarters. My salary was a princely \$60 a month. The hospital no longer exists and the building has been converted into an assisted living facility. I was the first female intern the hospital had.

When Elie came over he was able to get an internship at Mary's Help (now Seton Medical Center). We married April 17, 1948. I finished my internship but didn't practice medicine until many years later. In the meantime, I had two children; a daughter, Vallery and a son Daniel. I stayed home to take care of them. Many years later, I wanted to practice but since I had never taken the medical licensing test (State Board), I was not licensed. I essentially had to prepare all over again. This time I had to learn subjects, such as biochemistry that were not even in existence when I first studied. Nevertheless I persevered and passed my State Board in 1978. I worked as a physician for the City of San Francisco for many years.

I have a great interest in the arts. The opera, symphony, theater, museums, etc. are very important to me. I also enjoy our various pets, nature and our family road trips.