



## Hannah Berkson Siegal

Hannah Berkson was born in Chestlachova, Poland. In those days in Eastern Europe, Jews were segregated from the Christian populace and, overall, treated poorly. Hannah's family lived in a ghetto under poor conditions. Every so often bands of Kosaks would stage what were called pogroms against the Jews, riding into a village or ghetto and randomly killing Jewish people. During one such event, Hannah remembers being on the street with her mother, Hinda, when the soldiers rode through and started shooting. Hinda grabbed Hannah (probably 7 or 8) and ducked behind a vendor's cart in the outdoor marketplace. When they got home, neither was hurt, but there was a hole in her mother's dress where a bullet had passed right between her legs. It is not hard to understand why the Berkson family wanted to come to the US.

Henry Berkson came before his family in 1909 and found work in New Orleans as a shoemaker. Hinda with their five children born in Poland, Hannah, Abe, Willie, Sadie and Annie, followed the next year. (Joe, Dena and Golda were born in the States.) Hannah used to remark that New York had been much dirtier than expected, and how amazed they had been by bananas and black people—both of which they were encountering for the first time! They were frightened, poor and didn't speak the language.

You know, they tell me I made a hundred years old! But, ninety or a hundred, as far as I'm concerned, it really makes no difference....”

*LL: “What do you remember about Poland?”*

“Mama sold shoes. Papa made them. She sold shoes in front of a church.”

*LL: “Did you ever go in?”*

Incredulously, “Are you kidding!?”

Her inflection told worlds about her Jewish convictions, her forthrightness and sense of humor.

She fell silent, seeming to take a long, long look down time, and then began again. “I was the oldest of 8 children—three boys and five girls. I was only 9 when we left Poland. Once we got into Germany we were safe, but we couldn't stay there either. I don't think they wanted us. I don't think I have any family in Poland anymore, some might be in Belgium now. But if I did, I'd like to get 'em out.” With a sly smile she whispered, “I'd sneak 'em out!”

There was more to come. “We went to New York on a boat. I liked watching one color of the sea change to another. Yes, it changed colors! Beautiful! Mama was scared I'd fall over so she moved me. When we got to New York it wasn't like it is now. You had to wait (Ellis Island). They kept you a few days before they let you out. Once they let my Daddy out, then they let the rest of the family out. But nowadays each one has to register for themselves. I remember eating a sweet potato in New York. I was hungry. We came to New Orleans right after New York because we had some people living here.

“Life was hard. You know how it is. I tried to take care of them all. I went to work to see two of my brothers get to be lawyers. Two weeks of my salary made up only a little of what it cost for their college. I don't remember how much. They became lawyers. They've passed away. They say men don't live as long... It hurts when you think you come from a large family and they are all gone. But it's the will of G-d. Nothing you can do about it.” Shaking her head, “I don't know.”

She drank some more of her Matzo ball soup and brightened “But I have a great, great

nephew, Arnold. He's here, you know. He comes to see me. You've met him? Yes, well, he's more friendly than I am. I'm not as friendly. And I have a granddaughter, Dori."

*LL: "You must be proud of them."*

"What's that?"

*LL: "Are you proud of them - Dori and Arnold?"*

"Am I proud of her??! Of course, I'm proud of her!! She's a good child! Arnold is too. G-d bless the two of them!"

She settled back to do some more remembering. "One thing I'll never forget. About my grandfather. When I was 6 or 7 he sat me down and made me look up in the sky and said to me, 'There will be a day when they will be flying up there in the air.' He was right! I saw Lindbergh, you know."

Tucking into her soup again, she fished for the last bit of Matzo ball. A mood of introspection softened her voice. "I don't go out anymore. I used to go to Beth Israel. I don't even go on holy days to Shule (the synagogue). I stay home and pray. They used to announce the prayers over the TV—I don't know if they do that anymore. It's the prayers in your heart that are the ones that count anyhow... G-d answers prayer.

"The hardest thing is not seeing. I don't know who is talking to me. But I'm very thankful that they're good to me here. I thank G-d that I'm here and they're taking care of me. People here are nice to me because I can't see.

"My best advice? Simple: Be good. That's all." Knowing her own mind and as sure of herself as ever, the conversation was over. "Nurse, please take me to bed. I'm tired."



L to R: Willie, Hannah, Abe, Annie, Sadie seated was Arnold's great-grandmother



Hinda and Henry Berkson (her parents) with Abe (the baby), Hannah, Sadie and Willie; 1907

Miss Hannah has buried two husbands, one son, and all seven of her brothers and sisters. She worked from age 16 to 70, retailing fabric. She herself was an expert at sewing, needlepoint, crochet and tatting. And her vegetable garden yielded a perpetual family harvest.

Her nephew, Arnold Abrams, tells that when he was orphaned as an infant his Aunt Hannah never went back to work. "She stayed home with me and was my constant playmate, companion, diaper changer, butt wiper, storyteller, etc. until I went to school. She walked me to the bus stop every morning, rain or shine; and when the bus came back at the end of the day, she was always standing there as though she had never left. She is one of the most honest, reliable and G-d-fearing people I have ever met. It is due to her that I am an active participant in my Orthodox Jewish Synagogue for she has shared her religion with me all of my life.

*(The spelling of the word "G-d" throughout is in deference to Miss Hannah's orthodox belief. LL)*



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*Living Legacies*

(310) 741-8559

[ariel@livinglegacies.com](mailto:ariel@livinglegacies.com)