

This is my attempt to record what little family history I can remember from recent conversations with Aunt Bess Penner and my dad, Sam Levin.

By Sandra Rendall

Aunt Bess didn't seem to have too much to tell me, but that is understandable considering the circumstances. It was the day after my mother, Helen's, funeral which was on November 13th. My mother died on November 10, exactly one month before her 79th birthday. Apparently she and dad were sitting at their breakfast bar eating supper when she fell off the stool, it fell with her. My dad having only 3% vision in one eye and nothing at all in the other had a hard time figuring out what had happened and in the process of figuring it out, he fell, and injured his back causing him considerable pain even now, a week later. He apparently managed to find the phone and got help from the front desk of the building where they live. It is not necessary to dial a number to get help. They will come on the line if you take the receiver off and don't start dialing someone within a few seconds. Help came, but they felt mother was dead before she hit the floor. Her pacemaker was working fine, but her heart muscle just would not work anymore.

Anyway, on Thursday morning I asked some questions of my dad, and in the afternoon I asked similar questions of Aunt Bess in an effort to find out a little something of where I came from. Aunt Bess is the last of the Lepter family – the only son in the family had no children. Uncle Lou was the firstborn, then came Molly, Ann, Bess, and lastly my mother, Helen. None of these children were given middle names which Aunt Bess seemed to feel was traditional for that era, place and family. My grandfather Morris Lepter left Russia in 1901, leaving behind a wife pregnant with their first child. I can't remember the name of the town they lived in, and Aunt Bess said the name had been changed, anyway. He apparently lived and worked in the east until his child was around 18 months old, then brought his family here. The girls were all born in Passaic, New Jersey. They lived there several years, then decided to try homesteading in or near Wheatland, Wyoming. According to Aunt Bess, he was a poor businessman and his wife frequently had to figure a way to make things work out so they had food on the table. Aunt Bess recalls one time in the winter when she went to the outhouse and somehow locked herself in and couldn't get out again, though the door had a simple hook and eye lock. She thought she was there for about 2 hours before they found her. She suffered a long time with "chilblains" in her fingers and toes, and now suffers considerable arthritis which she feels might be at least partially a result of that severe chill. Eventually they gave up homesteading and went to Des Moines. I don't quite know how they landed there, or what he did there. At some time he became a window washer.

My dad was born in Bludeva, Poland. His father Nathan came to this country through Galveston, Texas in 1910. He left behind a wife and four children whom he sent for in 1913 or 1914. Jake, Esther (she changed her name to Elaine because she didn't like Esther). Selma and my dad, who was 6 or 8 when they came here. Dorothy and Sarah were born here. The family came over through the auspices of the Hias-Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

Dad remembers little of Poland, though he did say they were a crude people. He remembers their house had dirt floors, that it was cold, but it must have been warm inside as he remembers when someone opened the outside door the steam billowed out like a cloud. He also remembers that they had no outhouses, and if people had to relieve themselves they did so anywhere, anytime. Dad recalls most of

his family went to a spot behind the barn for that. He remembers women squatting on the sidewalks for that purpose. The walks were not concrete like we have, but wood. Or sometimes there were no walks as such, they just walked in the streets.

They first lived in Bushnell, Illinois, then in Siota, Illinois. My dad went through school in Siota, and was in the first class to attend the new high school there, though he only attended from the beginning of the school year until the start of Christmas vacation. His grade average upon graduation from 8th grade was 96.5% and he was offered a scholarship to any teacher's college in the state of Illinois, but was financially unable to take advantage of it.

In Siota his dad used to salvage scrap iron and sell it. He had no horse and wagon, and had to lug it piece by piece. The people of the community got together and bought him a horse and wagon so he would work more efficiently. Eventually he paid them back.

When Dad's mother died, his father advertised in the newspapers for a wife and eventually found one in Des Moines, Iowa, or possible in Nevada, Iowa since that is where they lived after that. She was related to the Deutch family who were helpful in getting jobs for those who needed them, and advised my Dad to attend Northwestern University where he had no problem getting into their accounting program. This was when he was 18 or 19 years old. He didn't finish college, but made his living as an accountant the rest of his working years. He worked for Des Moines Packing Plant for several years, then went into business for himself. The time spent at the packing plant were not good years for him, as the owner was a Jewish cattle buyer, but his partner and the man who was my dad's direct boss was very antisemitic and made life miserable for him.

Eventually, he quit and went into business for himself since he already had a few small businesses he did books for.

My dad's father had a scrap yard in Nevada, and a corner grocery store. I also think he raised mink for a while, as he promised my mother a mink coat which she never got. He also owned several houses which he rented out. He never did make much money on these enterprises as he was a soft touch for any tale of woe and extended credit which was mostly never paid off. I can remember my parents discussing that at various times. And I saw for myself how people would come into his store, take what they wanted and write it in a little book, instead of paying for the goods.

I used to like to get myself a Dr. Pepper from the cooler. This was when pop came in 6-ounce bottles, and before pop coolers were refrigerated. Pop was put into a large chest which was probably insulated somewhat, then large chunks of ice were added to keep the pop cool. I would hang over the edge till I found the kind I wanted, and my mother would worry about how I might fall in. I never did!

During World War II, when lots of foods were rationed, we could get anything we wanted from my grandfather's store and he never let us pay for it, nor did he collect ration points, so we always had plenty of sugar and other things that most people could get only in small quantities. Gasoline was also rationed, but we could go outside and pump our tank full, also without paying or giving up ration points. This was when they had the gas pumps with the big bubble on top. You push a lever back and forth until the bubble was full of gas, then let it flow by gravity into the car's gas tank. It was heavy work for a little girl. I seem to recall that at one time my grandfather also had an ice house, though I can't remember

who told me that. It would be interesting to talk to other members of the family to get more information and to double check on what little I do have.

My dad remembers his dad's attempts to speak English. One phrase that stuck in his mind was that his dad would pat him on the head and say "You're a nice little boy, don't you?"

My parents met at someone's party. It was agreed the party would move on to another home. and Dad said he didn't know the way, so mother spoke up and said she knew, and got into his car to direct him to the new location.

My dad's sister Elaine has spent most of her life in a mental institution in northern California. She was a young girl and was going somewhere on a streetcar. Somehow she was hit by the streetcar and brain damaged. She did have four children, the youngest of whom, Nina, lived with us one school year. She was killed in the next year or two in a car accident with a boyfriend on the Golden Gate Bridge, or the Oakland Bridge. She was sort of a wild kid, having mostly grown up without a mother to look after her.