

INTRODUCTION

Mama was born Perl Kaplan (Kaplansky?) in Tykocin, Poland (Tiktin in Yiddish). This shtetl lies in a northwest direction from *Białystok*. About 2,000 people live there today. During the Holocaust, 3,800 Jews were slaughtered there.

Her actual birth-date is in doubt. She gave the immigration service the date of December 12, 1902. However, Papa always said that she was born in the year 1900, 2 years earlier. It seems the reason was that Papa was born in 1902.

In America, the Yiddish name Perl became Pearl. Perl in Yiddish (both singular and plural) means the gemstone pearl. Papa playfully and affectionately called her Pauline and even Paulie. Her family called her Perele. To us boys—she was just plain Mama.

For children or for affection, “ele” (pronounced eh’leh) is added in Yiddish to the end of the given name. Thus, Mama referred to the author, *Fishl*, as *Fishele*.

Mama did not arrive on Ellis Island until 1921. Her father had come prior to World War I to make enough money to pay the steerage for Mama, her mother, younger sisters and brother. Because there was no mail delivery from America during the four war years, they lost contact with each other and only a chance meeting by a landsman brought the news of “Zeyde’s” whereabouts.

The horror stories of the marauding Cossacks, trading goods with the Polish peasants and the trip on the crowded ship are only a few of the hardships and dangers Mama encountered—as a teenager and in her early twenties. Stories as a seamstress, trying to learn English and marrying Papa, a non-religious Jew, all added to her misery and frustration.

Coming from a town not far from foreign borders and having to barter with the peasant farmers required her to be fluent in several languages. She was fluent in Polish, Russian, German, and

naturally knew Yiddish and Hebrew. Last of all, she finally learned how to speak "American."

Culture shock was just the beginning of her woes as she went to work in the garment shops of the Lower East Side and soon dropped out of night school. All of this is the material of "Mama's Stories."

Thirteen months after marrying Papa, Fishl was born and a year and week later Mama had twin boys. Within 53 weeks Mama gave birth to three boys.

After unsuccessful attempts in the shoe business and as a house painter, in 1937 Papa borrowed \$500 and purchased an abandoned 42 acre farm a mile East of Baptistown, in rural Hunterdon County, New Jersey. He paid \$5,000 for the farm with the barn and chicken coops eleven-room farmhouse that had a slate roof, a low-ceiling basement. It was built circa 1842 and still exists.

Many of these stories are how Mama and the family coped with no central heat, no electricity, an outhouse, an outside well and how she was able to supplement the family income by taking in "roomers and boarders" from New York during the summer months.

It was a constant battle with Papa's ideas of a "windfall" and the realities of practicality in the business world. It is about her love of her children and grandchildren, and her willingness to sacrifice her personal needs (let alone her wants) for "my boys."

By this time, modern amenities had come in and the boys had grown up. Mama became Americanized. She even learned to drive a car.

After the Great Flood of 1955 (when the Delaware River flooded in 1955) and all the hens drowned, Papa had to "make a living." He returned to the shoe business and opened a highway store.

All these situations affected her and these stories show her gradual change from a Yiddish-speaking greenhorn to a "fensee lady" and eventually to a failing, elderly woman.

Many other women of Mama's generation had similar experiences

and their tales of hardship and woe need to be told for this generation where hardship is driving an older car, not having a cell phone or not having a TV set in each room.


