

Born: July 10, 1910

Death: August 19, 2001

Dora Coopersmith Rosenzweig was born in the Lower East Side of New York City. Her parents had been in America for only 3 years. They had come from Warsaw, Poland. In 1911, Dora's father moved the family to Detroit, MI, so he could work in the Ford Motor Co. factory at \$5 an hour. They lived in a neighborhood that was predominately Jewish.

Dora had one "baby brother" and two younger sisters. At an early age, the youngest sister died of diphtheria. No English was spoken in the home. Dora had to learn it when she went to Kindergarten. At home, the family spoke Yiddish. "The Yiddish newspaper was read at the table every night when there was time. . . . It brought out all the wonderful experiences of immigrants, love stories, sad stories. So we learned a love of reading and books from that," said Dora.

"We had, despite not having a lot of money, a very cultural life early on, and a love for music because my father always hummed the old tunes," continued Dora. Her mother also took them to the Yiddish Theater. In summarizing her childhood, Dora said, "People have asked me whether I felt underprivileged or whether I had a happy childhood. I never thought about that when I was a child. I just enjoyed everything we had."

Throughout her high school years, Dora's family was in the restaurant business. About the time she graduated, however, the stock market had crashed, the Great Depression had started, and the family lost the restaurant. Dora struggled to decide what to do next—go on to college or go to work. One of her New York cousins encouraged her to go on to college. Dora took his advice and enrolled in Detroit Teachers College (now Wayne State University, College of Education).

Dora specialized in Kindergarten and Early Education. By the time she was 18-years-old, Dora had completed the 2 year program and was teaching in a school in a poor Detroit neighborhood with 35 first graders in the mornings and 35 Kindergarteners in the afternoons. For the next 5 years, Dora taught at whatever school she was assigned. "We never argued; we just went where we were sent. We knew in those days that if you were not happy with your job, there were at least ten more teachers waiting and happy to be placed."

In 1933, Dora met Leonard Rosenzweig through his sister who had been Dora's classmate in college. Dora said that she had been unaware of him while the girls were going to school and then teaching. He had been away at University of Michigan's medical school. Nevertheless, during the holidays that year, they met and were married within 6 months.

At the time of their marriage, Leonard was working as the superintendent of the State Hospital in Warren, PA. In medical school, he had decided to specialize in psychiatry. Their first three children were born "in the environment of the State Hospital," said Dora. That environment included their apartment in the center of the patients' building with the men patients on one side and the women patients on the other.

In 1946, the Rosenzweigs moved to Grand Rapids, MI, as Leonard had been hired as the director of the Grand Rapids Child Guidance Clinic. They moved Dora said, “. . . because we wanted a little more variety of culture and economic strata for the children.” At that time, Dora was pregnant with their fourth child. Yet, “coming to Grand Rapids as private citizens could be called culture shock, economy shock, a shock from many angles,” recalled Dora. As part of the state-run hospital, they had had no worries about the housekeeping, grocery shopping, or cooking. But in Grand Rapids she “had to learn about going to the grocery store and buying food, instead of having it supplied by the hospital commissary.” So I had a lot of new learning experiences. But it was wonderful. It was great,” she concluded.

By 1950, her husband was in private practice, and Dora “was able to become involved in community work, which [she] enjoyed very much.” In their neighborhood, which was predominately non-Jewish, “Mr. Emanuel Brown thought a good introduction for me into the community would be on the board of the Council for Christians and Jews [no longer exists],” said Dora. She was also invited to be on the board of the Women’s City Club.

In addition to community work, Dora began taking art classes from Sylvia Krisshoff, who had begun teaching water color painting in her basement. “That opened a whole new vista,” recalled Dora. When University of Michigan began sending extension art teachers to Grand Rapids, Dora said she took every course. Eventually, she settled on her favorite media—painting and weaving. About weaving, she liked to do the “unconventional kind of wild colors, mostly wall hangings.”

In 1955, Leonard and Dora went to Israel. When they came back, they “were so enthusiastic and moved, that [they] became involved with spreading the word of what Israel is, helping them as much as [they] could, trying to get people to understand.” Recalling a presentation at the Women’s City Club, Dora said, it “. . . was the first time I had done a large project, educating myself and the people of Grand Rapids.”

When one of her boys was in seventh grade, Dora was asked to teach the seventh grade Sunday school. Before she accepted the request, however, Dora hesitated. “I knew a little about the Bible. . . . History was never my best subject. These were the two subjects that I had to teach. So I thought I would supply some handicrafts with that. Maybe make it a little more interesting for them and me. . . . The kids gobbled it up. They love it.”

In 1969, Dora was one of the founders of the Jewish Cultural Council, more commonly known as Spectrum. The planning committee represented people from both the Synagogue and the Temple. They wanted to have “programs that would cross the barriers of the different factions, that would represent the entire [Jewish] community . . . . We didn’t have any money, but we were highly enthusiastic,” said Dora.

At the time of this interview, Spectrum had grown to include the Jewish Choir (called Shir Shalom, “singing for peace”), Jewish Theater, and four or five programs a year. According to Dora, it was called “Spectrum” because “we try to balance our programs by having two serious lecturers a year and then music, drama, or poetry.” In 1985, Spectrum had its “first opportunity to have a public exhibit.” It was called “The Fabric of Jewish Life” and was displayed in the Grand Rapids Public Museum.

Other Resources:

Genealogy

<http://www.ics.uci.edu/~dan/genealogy/Krakow/Families/Rosenzweig.html>

The Rosenzweig-Coopersmith Foundation

<http://www.faqs.org/tax-exempt/MI/Rosenzweig-Coopersmith-Foundation.html>