

Poor Mrs. Engelsky:
Of Memory and Tragedy

Charles Salkin

“Poor Mrs. Engelsky.”

I first heard of Mrs. Engelsky in the early 1990s after the death of my aunt, Florence Solovey Salkin. My brother Sam, who lived near her in Berkeley, California, sent a two-page photocopy from her typewritten memoirs. Florence and her husband, our great uncle Max, both grew up in the northwestern Pennsylvania town of Oil City. After a many-decades absence from Oil City, Florence was reminiscing with a friend about their childhood days there. That conversation prompted this entry:

As a child, Fridays were especially wonderful days for me. Mama didn't work in our store on that day. She was busy in the kitchen baking bread, chopping fish for gefilte fish, making chicken soup and baking chicken and the weekly sponge cake. All this activity while the house was being cleaned and the children bathed and dressed.

There were six of us and it was unthinkable that any one of us would be absent when Mama blessed the candles at dusk to usher in the Sabbath. Everything was in readiness by then. The table with the white tablecloth, silver shined, and the special loaf of bread for Papa to bless when he came home from Synagogue and we sat down for dinner. Mama must have been exhausted by then because I remember that she ate very little. Papa, on the other hand, enjoyed eating and invariably praised Mama's cooking while finishing the meal with a dish of dried fruit compote.

I am sure this was a typical Friday evening occurrence in most orthodox Jewish families. I remind you of it, only as a preface to a story that continues to haunt me.

Perhaps I have already told you how Mama packed a black patent leather tote bag with food on Friday for me to deliver to friends who, for some reason, were unable to cook on that day. But each Friday my last stop was the same because Mrs. Engelsky never cooked on Friday. And every week Mama reminded me as I left our house: “Remember it's harder to receive than to give” and every time she said it I thought “poor Mama. Sometimes she gets her sentences mixed up.”

All the visits were fun and enjoyable, but going to Mrs. Engelsky was scary because she was always dressed in black and never smiled. Nor did she ever hug me and fuss over me like the others did. I tried to obey Mama and make conversation with her but rarely did I get a reply. Rather, she would become sad and tears would stream down her cheeks and I would leave wondering what I had said to cause such grief.

Mama would invariably change the subject when I tried to talk about Mrs. Engelsky and it was more than fifty years later that I heard her story from a friend I had

known as a child and with whom I had had no contact the previous fifty years.

We talked of many things and many people. Of our neighborhood we had lived in. It consisted mostly of Jews and Catholics. Polish and Irish Catholics. The Polish Priest was a pontifical tyrant, who kept even first generation American Poles illiterate. He would walk down the street with his two St. Bernard dogs, everyone clearing the sidewalk. He usually walked in to our store to talk with Papa. I never stayed to listen to their talks. But when the Irish Priest came it was fun to listen until they got down to a serious conversation.

It wasn't always pleasant for Jewish kids in our neighborhood. One had to learn to run faster than the bullies calling "dirty Jew" or "Christ killer" and their stone throwing. Our family had some degree of protection because Papa was the father figure for most of the Polish families. Many of them arrived with no names and it was Papa who Anglicized their Polish names, who read their mail for them, and bailed them out of jail after a rowdy Saturday night drunken binge. He really earned their respect and deservedly.

My friend and I talked about our very first school. It was a two-storied building with one large room on each floor with two grades in each room. All of us in our family went to the first and second grade to the same wonderful teacher: Miss Judge. My brother said the third and fourth grade kids were divided in to two groups. Those who ultimately went to college and those who went to reform school. Some of the children had to repeat the first two grades so often that by the time they got to the third grade they were considerably older than the average student. Life for the teacher in that room was very difficult. None of us in our family had the same third or fourth grade teacher.

We continued to talk of many incidents and many people and finally Mrs. Engelsky's name came up and it was my friend who told me that Mrs. Engelsky had a daughter, obviously older than I since I had no recollection of her. On a Friday, this little girl, then in the third grade, was kept in school very late by a teacher who said something was missing in the room and until it was returned or someone confessed or someone named the culprit they would remain in their seats. No one spoke up. As time went by Mrs. Engelsky's little girl kept getting more and more agitated knowing she had to get home before her mother lit the candles. Finally in desperation, she raised her hand and named the culprit. All but one of the class was dismissed.

Mrs. Engelsky's little girl never got home. When she got out of school some of the children stoned her to death.

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Needless to say, I was stunned. I remember that I gasped when I read the last line. I immediately called my father, Herman Salkin, at his home in Florida. He was very

close to Florence and Max and had grown up in Oil City, as well. He would surely know more about it.

Before I had a chance to ask him any questions about the story, he simply said, "Poor Mrs. Engelsky." I replied, "So, you knew her? Did you know about this? Is it true?" He had never heard the story and had never known Mrs. Engelsky but he definitely knew who she was. He related to me that when his mother, Sarah Keller, was a little girl, she fell from the balcony of their second-floor apartment. Mrs. Engelsky lived below and rushed to give her "the breath of life." Sarah lived on to become our grandmother. Other than that, Dad knew only that Mrs. Engelsky had led a sad life following some sort of tragedy.

I wanted to know more but, as the Internet was not yet available, that would have to wait for a future visit to what we have come to call "the old country."

In 1996, I finally arranged a visit to Oil City to do some research. I must admit that I was skeptical of the story about the Engelsky daughter's death. The Venango County Historical Society had an indexed archive of old local newspapers on microfilm. After hours of rolling and squinting I finally found the name "Engelsky" in a single newspaper article from June 1892. I was looking for information about the death of one young person and found instead an unimaginable disaster that killed hundreds.

From an article in the *Venango Citizen Press*: "In clearing the wreckage at Titusville yesterday, the workers came upon the body of a young girl named Engelsky, aged about 14. The body was exhumed at the iron works more than a thousand feet from the Engelsky home. This makes 54 bodies recovered. The eight missing and known to have perished swells the list of dead to 62. Oil City's death list will reach 53."

A few more articles from the local papers told the story of this horrific disaster, part natural, part man-made. A summary does not do this event justice but it at least puts the Engelskys' experience in context:

Throughout the month of May, there were endless rainstorms in northwestern Pennsylvania. Streams were swollen beyond their banks and roads and bridges were washed out. Then in early June, this was exacerbated by four days of continuous torrential downpour. Early in the morning on June 5, a privately owned dam in Spartansburg, seven miles upstream, burst. A wall of water from the mile-and-a-half-long reservoir headed toward Titusville, clearing everything in its path. Oil wells and tanks dotted the valley and the floodwaters collected oil, oil products and equipment along the way. When the flood reached Titusville proper, a refinery exploded and the floating petroleum became a floating fire spread thinly throughout the community. All of this was in the dark of night and without any warning.

As thousands of Titusville residents were terrorized by the strength and horror of the storm and fire, the floodwaters continued downstream toward Oil City. The valley between the two towns is very narrow and steep. The many villages, and their

residents who couldn't escape, were washed away with the raging flood and fire. The horrific scene in Titusville was repeated in Oil City where a large section of the community was inundated and burned. It is estimated that over 350 people died. One body was recovered in the city of Pittsburgh, well over 150 miles downstream.

The region was in shock and disarray for days. Rescue and recovery efforts were hampered by continued bad weather and damaged or destroyed infrastructure. In addition, nearly all of the communities that could otherwise be counted on to assist were themselves dealing with local impacts from the endless rain. Fundraising efforts began immediately with contributions from around the country. Piecing together the lives of those who survived would take a long time. For many, no relief effort could do their tragedy and loss justice.

So this was how the Engelsky girl died. A drive to the Jewish Cemetery in Titusville reinforced my assumptions. There I found three Engelsky gravestones. The first was for "Rebecca, Age 8 Years". This confirmed the death of the daughter though there were no dates on the stone and the age was different than the newspaper report. An adjacent stone was mostly illegible but appeared to be her father, "J. L. Engelsky." We knew that Mrs. Engelsky was a widow. The third said "Our Mother, Freda Engelsky, 1858-1923". This suggested that there had been other children but none of them was likely to still be alive.

I had found nothing about the murder and concluded that the story as told to Aunt Florence was likely not true. Perhaps it was just the stuff of family folklore or urban legend. But now I knew what had brought about Mrs. Engelsky's grief. She had lost part of her young family along with her home, her neighbors and the very fabric of her Titusville community. Sometime after the flood she had moved to Oil City, by way of Oil Creek passing by what little remained along its flood- and fire-ravaged banks.

I told my brother and father what I'd found. They were fascinated by the details of the flood that had devastated Titusville and Oil City over 30 years before Dad was born there and by the apparent disparity between Florence's friend's story and what was on the public record.

From time to time after that visit, I had the opportunity to talk to some "old-timers" who lived in or grew up in Oil City. I had hoped that they might be able to fill in a few blanks. My Aunt Jeannette Salkin Polan, Dad's older sister, confirmed that "Poor Mrs. Engelsky" was a neighbor of her grandparents, Julia and Sheamon Keller, when they lived in "the triangle" between Oil Creek and the Allegheny River in Oil City. She said that Mrs. Engelsky lived on the ground floor and the Kellers lived upstairs. She knew this because her mother, Sarah Keller Salkin, told her that Mrs. Engelsky breathed life back into her when she fell off the second-story porch. She knew nothing about the incident in Florence's story and knew none of the details of the infamous flood.

When I next spoke with my Aunt Charlotte Keller Rosin, Sarah Keller's younger sister and an Oil City resident, to ask her what she remembered about Mrs. Engelsky, she immediately responded, "Oh, Poor Mrs. Engelsky." She said she was a woman who lived in the Third Ward and babysat for the Keller children. Charlotte repeated the story that Sarah Keller fell off the balcony and Mrs. Engelsky "gave her the breath of life." She did not know what tragedy had befallen her but that she was a sad and lonely woman. Even though Charlotte was born in Oil City in 1913, she had never heard about the flood and fire. She couldn't imagine that she wouldn't have known if Mrs. Engelsky's daughter had been murdered.

On subsequent visits to Oil City and Titusville, I would think about the great flood and fire of 1892 and learned a little more about it but gained no new insight into the Engelskys. However, my curiosity remained and I continued to think that there must have been at least some element of truth in the story as related by Florence's childhood friend.

When I retired a few years ago, I began to spend more time working on the Salkin family tree and continuing research on local Delaware Jewish history that I had started many years ago. I now had the benefit of the Internet and, particularly, Ancestry.com. and Newspapers.com. Just over a year ago, my brother Sam and I were in Oil City together and we talked briefly about Mrs. Engelsky. I decided it was time to learn more about her, her husband and daughter and what may have become of the family since the early 1900s when she gave young Sarah Keller the breath of life.

These new sources added a lot to my understanding of the disaster of June 1892. It is clear that if the infamous Johnstown Flood had not preceded it three years earlier, this event would have iconic status.

Newspaper reports of the flood listed various additional Engelsky names and only added to my confusion about how many of the family members were effected and how many died. But it was soon apparent that more than just one Engelsky daughter and her father were lost.

Most important, for the first time, I found a newspaper reference to an assault and the death of a Libby Engelsky in 1902 – it was true! Based on later reports in various local and regional papers, it seems that the incident likely took place on Friday, November 12. She was nursed at home for six weeks in critical condition and passed away on Christmas Day. Libby was buried the next day in the Titusville cemetery with the family victims of the 1892 flood. The third-grader was just shy of ten years old. Oh my! This meant that Mrs. Engelsky was pregnant with Libby at the time of the flood and the loss of Libby's father.

A few weeks after Libby's death, her older brother Samuel, a tailor in Oil City, pressed charges against four of Libby's classmates: Otis Osman, Ronald Fry, Fred Farren and Edward Rogers, ranging in age from 9 to 12. They were arrested on a

warrant issued by Samuel charging aggravated assault and battery. This was accepted by a Venango County Grand Jury in early April. A trial was held later that month and the four were found Not Guilty on April 30.

Everything that we learn about the incident supports the story as related by Florence's friend except that Libby did not die on that Shabbos in November but lingered for six weeks. It is interesting that there was nothing in the local newspapers about the incident at the school or about her cause of death until the boys were arrested.

It is not hard to imagine a number of reasons that the four were not found guilty. The victim was the daughter of an immigrant single parent who lived in a poor, rough section of town. The brother who pressed the charges was not American-born, was Jewish, and had only recently become an American citizen. It is not likely that they could afford the best legal counsel. The severe charges against such young boys were not likely to stand unless there was no doubt about the facts and proof that their actions led directly to Libby's death. While the public record shows that they boys were found not guilty of assault, I can still only think of Libbie's death as a murder.

Now that I knew more of the facts surrounding this family legend, I decided to delve further into the Engelsky's lives to put their deaths in a proper context. We can now tell a much more complete story about them and their sojourn in Titusville and Oil City:

Frieda Rojenski (born c. 1857) and Yehuda Leyb Engelsky (born c. 1853) were married in Poland around 1875. They arrived in the United States with their children in 1891. As they were not here for the 1890 Census, we don't have a lot of detail about some of the family members. It is likely that there were four children: Cecelia/Sarah, Samuel, Rebecca, and Rosa. Mrs. Engelsky was later known as "Fannie." Mr. Engelsky's first name is variously noted as Abraham, Abram, Leon, Liebel, Levi, and Joseph. I'll call him Mr. Engelsky here.

In the late 1880s, "B. Engelsky," a peddler, lived on Water Street in Titusville. This was Barnard "Barney" Engelsky who later moved to Rochester, New York. He was presumably Mr. Engelsky's brother. Given the very close proximity of his home to Oil Creek, it is very possible that the newly-arrived relatives lived with him there. This may have been the house they occupied when the flood hit the city.

The flood began on June 5. The confusion in early newspapers accounts about the Engelskys is indicative of the general confusion that engulfed the community in the immediate aftermath of the flood and fire.

June 6 – *Harrisburg Telegraph*: Among dead and missing are "Mr. Engelsky and son"

June 7 – *New Orleans Times-Democrat*: Engelsky, tailor

June 7 – *Buffalo Evening News*: Mr. Joseph Engelsky and two children

June 9 – *Pittsburg Dispatch*: “two Engelsky children” among the missing
June 10 – *Pittsburg Dispatch*: “E. Engelsky and child”
June 10 – *Franklin News-Herald*: body of Engelsky girl, age 14, found 1000 feet from her home
June 10 – *Pittsburgh Press*: “Mrs. Engelsky” among the missing
June 15 – *Tionesta Forest Republican*: “Joseph Engelsky, Jewish tailor, and Rebecca Engelsky, his daughter, eight years”

These notices were repeated in dozens of newspapers in every region of the country. It is possible that some of these references are to the Engelsky relatives in Titusville but I haven't found any evidence that any of them died in the flood.

The only description we have of the Engelskys' flood experience comes from a report in the *Greenville Record-Argus* (my hometown newspaper) in January 1903. It was included in an article about the arrest of the four boys for Libbie's murder:

“During the flood and fire in Titusville on the night of June 4, 1892, their home on Water Street . . . was occupied by the father, Levi Engelsky, two sons Moses and Samuel, the mother, and three daughters, Misses Becky, Cecilia and Rose. The family were awakened about midnight by the noise of the raging waters of Oil Creek but the stream had surrounded the house and they were unable to escape. The waters continued to rise and the mother and her son Samuel went onto the roof. The house was swept away before the remainder of the family could reach that portion of the building. Rose succeeded in seizing a mattress and floated to the bank of the creek. The roof with Mrs. Engelsky and Samuel on top lodged near the Schwartz Barrel works of Titusville where they remained for 24 hours before they were rescued. The father, one son, Moses and daughters Becky and Cecelia, were drowned.”

From various sources and a second look at the Titusville cemetery, we learn that Becky (Rebecca) was either 8 or 14 and that Cecelia (Sarah) was 3. The inclusion of “Moses” in this article is very likely an error. There is no gravestone for him at the cemetery and no record of anyone with that name among the various lists of victims or in other public records. In December, Libbie Engelsky's obituary had appeared in the *Titusville Herald* and only mentioned that two sisters had died in the flood.

We don't know precisely what happened to the remnant Engelsky family immediately after June 1892. Regardless, they barely had had time to settle in and establish a home and business when the flood came. None of them would have been fluent in English, if they spoke it at all. Depending on when they had arrived in Titusville, the children might have only been in school for a few months. They would have had no assets beyond the charity of the local community that was itself devastated. Some reports say that one-third of the buildings in the town of 8,000 were flooded or destroyed.

The June 7 edition of the *Buffalo Evening News* tells about the heroic efforts of those in the community to help their friends and neighbors in the immediate aftermath of

the flood. One interesting and particularly relevant item: "Sieg Strauss and Wilberson, Sunday morning, with a horse and wagon rescued nearly 100 Jewish people on Water Street." Given that Water Street is located immediately adjacent to Oil Creek, it is likely that the Jewish community suffered disproportionately from the disaster. The people whom Mrs. Engelsky might have counted on to help her through this trying time were facing challenges of their own many times over.

Mrs. Engelsky eventually moved to Oil City. She and her surviving children were living there on Main Street by 1896. This section of the city, known as the Third Ward, lies at the confluence of Oil Creek and the Allegheny River. It had been completely destroyed by floodwaters and fire in 1892. It was apparently quickly rebuilt and in 1896 it looked like a Wild West town with closely packed wood-frame stores and residences and wooden sidewalks on either side of a dirt street.

We know that Mrs. Engelsky babysat for the Keller family and presumably did the same for others in the neighborhood. It is also likely that she assisted with her son's tailoring business. Otherwise, what little we know or can surmise about her life in Oil City must be extrapolated from the lives of her children. Of course, raising young Libby would have been her focus in the first years there.

The 1900 Federal Census for Oil City lists Samuel Engelsky (age 24) as the head of household along with his mother (43) and two sisters, Rosa (21) and young Libbie (7). In 1905 he advertised his business in the National Transit Building: "Tailoring, Cleaning and Pressing". In early 1907, he dropped the "sky" from his name and advertised himself as "Sam Engel." Some others in the broader Engelsky family did the same over time.

For a short time in the mid aught's, the Engelskys were joined in Oil City by Solomon Engelsky, presumably a younger brother of Mr. Engelsky. He had arrived in the United States from Poland in 1905 and was a cigar maker working on Spruce Street in Oil City by 1906. Solomon and his wife, also named Rosa, soon moved to Bradford where they operated a grocery store until his death in 1932. They had no children.

Around 1910, Sam Engel was married to Anna Millie (Mildred) Levy, eight years his junior, of Titusville. Their only child, a son Liebel, was born in 1913 in either Titusville or Oil City. It's fair to assume that the boy was named for his deceased grandfather, Yehuda Leyb. [Liebel is a diminutive for Leyb, Yiddish for lion.]

A few years later, Sam advertised his dry cleaning business for sale. He and his family moved to Rochester in 1916 joining his Uncle Barney who worked in the men's garment industry there. Sam continued as a tailor and drycleaner.

After Sam's marriage, Rosa (also known as Rose) and her mother lived alone in their small house on Main Street. From occasional newspaper accounts, we learn that Rosa was involved in the local chapter of Hadassah. She had Jewish friends in Pittsburgh whom she would visit and who in turn came to see her in Oil City.

Mrs. Engelsky died in their Main Street home on September 2, 1923. She was 66 and had been ill from kidney disease. Her obituary explains that her husband had died in the 1892 flood but incredibly there is no mention of the loss of her children at the same time or of the murder of Libbie ten years later. Burial was in the Titusville Jewish cemetery. In her will, she left \$100 to the Pittsburgh Jewish Home for the Aged.

Thinking about the end of Mrs. Engelsky's life, I realized that much sympathy was due "Poor *Rose* Engelsky." She had suffered right alongside her mother: the flood, the loss of home and family, struggling to re-establish themselves in Oil City and the loss of her young sister. Presumably her life was dedicated to caring for her mother and managing a household for her mother and her brother prior to his marriage. She probably worked in Sam's shop as well and may have lost her livelihood when he moved away. What would become of this forlorn person?

We don't have to wait long for the answer. From Florence Salkin we learned how the Jewish community supported Mrs. Engelsky in her grief following the death of Libby. The broader Jewish community came to the aid of 44-year-old Rose immediately after her mother's death. Nearly a century before JDate, her friends in Oil City, New Castle, Pittsburgh and Youngstown, Ohio, went into action.

Less than two weeks after her mother's funeral, the society section of the *New Castle Herald* reported: "J. Friedberg of Detroit, Michigan, is visiting at the home of Mr. and Mrs. S. Wycoff [Wilkoff] on Wayne Avenue" and "Miss Rose Engel of Oil City is visiting at the home of Mr. and Mrs. S. Wycoff [Wilkoff] on Wayne Avenue." A few days later, the same paper reported, "Mrs. S. Wilkoff and her guest, Miss Rose Engel, have just returned from a two days' visit with friends in Pittsburgh." Then only a few more days later, "Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Miller and family and Mrs. Wilkoff and her guest, Miss Rose Engel, motored to Youngstown, Sunday."

We don't know if Rose knew Friedberg before this whirlwind of social activity but on October 17, Rose and Jacob Friedberg married in a very modest ceremony in Oil City. Owing to her mother's recent passing, there were only 10 close friends as witnesses. The Friedbergs honeymooned in West Baden, Indiana, and returned to live in Detroit where the groom, a widower, was a retired jewelry merchant. The newspaper noted that Rose had spent several years in nursing.

My Aunt Charlotte recalled that Rose must have married into money because whenever she returned to Oil City for visits in later years, she arrived in a chauffeur-driven car. Jacob lived until 1932 and Rose continued to live in Detroit until her death in 1950. She was survived only by a stepdaughter.

Before telling this story, I thought it was important to determine if any descendants of Mr. and Mrs. Engelsky were still alive. If so, they should know about my research and I hoped they might add to the narrative. The only possibility was Sam's son Liebel. After graduating high school in 1931 in Rochester (the first in the family to do so), he attended college for two years then worked as a salesman and retail manager. By 1939, he had relocated to Indianapolis, Indiana. He was living there in 1942 when he enlisted in the US Army. Less than a year later, he died in the stateside plane crash of an Army cargo plane in Georgia. He was survived only by his mother, Mildred Levy Engel, who accompanied his body to his burial in the Jewish cemetery in Titusville. She had been living with him in Indiana, presumably after the death of her husband. Liebel, known as Lee, had never married. Mildred lived out her years in Rochester.

By now, there is no one left alive who knew Mrs. Engelsky. With no living descendants, her incredible story is just this series of anecdotes and historical references pieced together from disparate sources. And so ends her saga. But, please allow me an afterword . . .

When Rosa Engelsky married Jacob Friedberg a month after her mother's death in 1923, the ceremony and reception were held at the home of family friends, Jacob and Bessie Solovey. They were the parents of 16-year-old Florence, whose later memoirs began this search of memory and tragedy. By incredible coincidence, the Solovey's next-door neighbors were Esther and Samuel Salkin, my Dad's grandparents. 18-year-old Max Salkin was to become Florence's husband ten years later. His older brother, Louis Salkin, had moved out of the family home three years earlier to marry his sweetheart, Sarah Keller, our grandmother to whom Mrs. Engelsky gave the breath of life.

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