

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

My Daughter, The Doctor

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin has written lovingly about Jewish parents and their role in Jewish humor. "Perhaps their most prevalent desire," he writes, "is for *nakhas* from children. *Nakhas*, meaning pleasure or contentment, is both a Hebrew and Yiddish word. Over time, however, it has come to connote the particular pride parents derived from their children's accomplishments."

"What is it," he continues, "according to Jewish humor, that brings parents the most *nakhas*? In the case of sons, it is professional attainments. As a 'personal' ad in a Jewish newspaper announced: *'Mr. and Mrs. Marvin Rosenbloom are pleased to announce the birth of their son, Dr. Jonathan Rosenbloom.'*"

Jewish parents' obsession with their sons becoming doctors has long been a part of contemporary folklore (as in "my son, the doctor"), but in 1820, history took a different turn.

James Monroe was re-elected president and England's George III died. The Missouri Compromise allowed Maine to become the twenty-third state of the Union. Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the architect who supervised the reconstruction of the U.S. Capitol building, died in New Orleans from yellow fever. And Elizabeth D. A. Magnus Cohen (future doctor) was born on February 22, 1820, in New York City.

Her parents, David and Phoebe Magnus Cohen, were of British ancestry. Her father built the "Great Eastern," the ship that laid the first trans-Atlantic cable. Elizabeth was educated in New York City, where she met and married Dr. Aaron Cohen, and gave birth to five children. According to interviews she granted to the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, her life's turning point came when her young son died of measles. She felt more could have been done to save her child, and she determined to "become a doctor myself and help mothers to keep their little ones well." Her husband moved to New Orleans in 1853 to study surgery, while his wife took a quite daring step: She enrolled in the Philadelphia College of Medicine, the first women's medical school in the United States.

In a time when women professionals were looked down upon, Aaron Cohen supported his wife's career choice. In 1857 she graduated fifth in a class of 36 and, diploma in hand, joined her husband in New Orleans. Elizabeth Cohen became the fourteenth doctor, and the very first woman, to practice medicine in Louisiana. Her colleagues in New Orleans (all male) welcomed her at a time when they badly needed medical professionals. Yellow fever was to strike New Orleans a severe blow that year. She must have faced some major obstacles, however, in being accepted. In 1867 the New Orleans City Directory ignored her medical qualifications and listed her as a midwife and in 1869 she was listed as a "doctress". But by 1876 (almost twenty years later), she at last appeared as Mrs. Elizabeth Cohen, physician.

She related in her two *Times-Picayune* interviews, "I worked with the doctors of those days through two epidemics of yellow fever, one in the year 1857 and one in (1878). I attended to families through generations, and often the girl at whose coming into the world I had assisted, when grown to womanhood would engage me for a similar function."

Mrs. Cohen's practice was mostly limited to women and children, and after some time she became widowed and alone after the death of her children. In 1887 she entered Touro Infirmary and became a resident of their Department of the Aged and Infirm, later called the Julius Weis Home for the Aged. She became a hospital volunteer, caring for the sewing and linen room. She cultivated an interest in women's rights and current events, even in old age.

"I'm glad to see the girls of today getting an education. In my youth you had to fight for it. And I believe in suffrage, too—things will be better when women can vote and can protect their own property and their own children." In anticipation of the ratification of the 19th amendment that year, she replied, "Even if I am a hundred, I'm for votes for women."

And she lived a life longer than a hundred, one devoted to those in need of her talents. By "trying," she wrote, "my very best to be good according to my ideas of goodness—that is to live in the fear of God and keeping his ten commandments," she passed away on May 28, 1921, at the ripe old age of 101. Elizabeth Cohen was buried in Gates of Prayer Cemetery on Canal Street, and she left her estate to the Julius Weis Home for the Aged.

In those bygone days, people thought of a woman doctor on a par with "laundress", but (through her perseverance) Elizabeth Cohen made all of New Orleans proud that occasionally Jewish daughters get to be doctors.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"My Daughter, The Doctor"
Ned Hémard
Copyright 2010