

## **DR. MAX DANZIS**

In 1889 two Jewish teenagers from what is now Ukraine arrived separately at Castle Gardens in lower Manhattan and made their way to Newark, New Jersey where there was a large Jewish population. Neither 18 year old Victor Parsonnet (1871-1920) nor 15 year old Max Danzis (1874-1953) could speak a word of English but within a dozen years both graduated from medical school, married and had children and were among a small group of recent immigrants who organized Newark's Beth Israel Hospital which opened in 1901.

After Czar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881, Jews were officially scapegoated and severe May Laws restricted their civil rights and educational opportunities. Government policy regarding Jews was described as one third starvation, one third assimilation and one third emigration. Victor's home city Balta (near Odessa) had a population of about 2,000, 80% Jewish and a bloody pogrom there in 1892 spurred large scale Jewish emigration. But for Victor there was something else - as his son Eugene once recalled, "father was a real revolutionary in his youth and had to escape Czarist Russia in order to save his life...[Moreover] "It was a period of great love in this country; the streets were paved with gold [and] every mother's son could become President."

Shortly after landing in the New World Victor dropped his awkward Russian surname Petzetzelski in favor of Parsonett (later Parsonnet) which may have been in honor of Albert Parsons, an American Socialist leader and anarchist who was hanged in 1887 following a bomb attack on Chicago police remembered as the Haymarket Riots. Indeed his son Eugene Victor Parsonnet was named for the famous Socialist leader Eugene Victor Debs. Victor (VP1) attended law school at Boston University for eighteen months before shifting to Tufts Medical College for another year and then transferring to Long Island Medical College Hospital from which he graduated in 1898. His wife Augusta Lavine ("Gusta") dropped out of medical school after two years because the couple couldn't afford two tuitions and went to work for the Singer Sewing Machine Company. She also was public spirited and became a leading Suffragette in New Jersey and was active in the national movement.

Max Danzis was more descriptive about his early life:

*I left Czarist Russia in my early youth because of the persecution and discrimination against the Jewish people. Conditions at that time were [in]tolerable, educational facilities, even of the most elementary type, were not extended to the masses and higher education was almost prohibitive to Jewish students. The doors of the universities were completely closed. Realizing that there was no future for me in Russia under such conditions, I determined, with the consent of my parents, to emigrate - America beckoned to me. Immigrants were welcomed here at that time. No obstacles were put in the way of immigrants who were seeking admission to the United States.*

Max Danzis was one of the first Jews to emigrate from Felshtin, a small shtetl in Podolia. When the teenager arrived he had one ruble in his pocket, equivalent to about 50 cents today, and lodged his first night in a stable. For much of the first year he boarded with a *landsmen* from Felshtin, working by day as a delivery boy in a wrapping paper store at a salary of eight dollars a month while attending night school and learning the language. In 1894 while working as a furrier in Manhattan he participated in a nationwide Hatters Strike. Within six years of coming to America Max Danzis was able to obtain admission to Bellevue Hospital Medical College which in those days required only four years of high school. After graduating in 1899 he married Jenny Reich and most likely it was then that they settled in Newark where she had family. Little more is known about either of the two young men's early days, but both were the first of their families to arrive in this country and once settled sent for relatives to follow them. Soon their lives would overlap in most significant ways.

Both Victor and Max worked extremely long hours as general practitioners and surgeons in Newark. In the early days the charge for a house call was one dollar, an office visit fifty cents, an obstetrical delivery twelve dollars, but many people couldn't pay anything and the burden of charity fell on the doctors' shoulders. At first Victor made house calls by horse and buggy, while going from floor to floor in a tenement sometimes seeing fifty patients in one building. Eugene Parsonnet recalled that when his father traded in the buggy for an automobile, he continued to carry a long whip so that when young boys hopped on the running board and yelled "get a horse, get a horse," he could beat them off! Later, Victor got a chauffeur to drive him around in his Ford or Reo; Max Danzis drove a Pierce-Arrow.

The Parsonnet and Danzis families lived close to each other in the Jewish section of Newark and their first born children who arrived within a few weeks of each other in 1900, grew up together and later married. Victor was a heavy cigarette smoker and died suddenly at age 49, about four years before Eugene Parsonnet and Rose Danzis married so when their son (VP2) was born August 29, 1924 he was named after his late grandfather (VP1). (A cousin Victor J. Parsonnet also was named after their mutual grandfather.)

Although VP2 never knew the man whose name he bore, Grandpa Max was a strong influence, both personally and professionally; remembered as “warm, cheerful, humble, a quiet leader, a voice of reason, a good listener.” When Max graduated from the Bellevue Hospital Medical College (later NYU) in 1899, he was the first of four generations of the family to study there, but as VP2 has written, after his grandfathers settled in Newark they “sadly discovered that Jewish patients could not gain access to the local hospitals and Jewish doctors could not find staff appointments.” There were two factions in the local Jewish community: one was a conservative element who didn’t believe that a separate hospital was necessary and favored an ambulatory clinic (which opened in 1902.) However Victor and Max, both only recently arrived, were allied with a woman’s organization, The Daughters of Israel, which in 1900 raised \$4,000 to purchase a three-story wood-frame house directly across the street from the Parsonnet home-office.

The rival organizations merged in 1901 when the first Beth Israel Hospital opened with 21 beds; by 1908 with greater acceptance and a growing influx of Jewish immigrants, it expanded to new quarters with about 110 beds. The original staff consisted of twelve Jewish physicians - eight were very recent graduates - and 24 nurses. Within two decades the facility outgrew its early quarters and when philanthropists Louis Bamberger and Felix Fuld donated funds for a new non-sectarian hospital, it moved in 1928 to a new facility which had 350 beds, a school of nursing and an outpatient building; the entire complex cost about \$3.5 million.

Victor and Max spent their whole professional careers at Newark Beth Israel Hospital and served in various leadership roles both at the hospital and in the greater medical community. VP1 was sturdily built, vigorous, a dynamic personality, well informed on many subjects and active in progressive and socialist causes. He remained a political radical and in 1908 ran on the Socialist ticket for Alderman. Although Victor left no publi-

cations or speeches, eulogies praised his splendid surgical skill and devotion to patients.

For his part, Max Danzis was responsible for the creation of new services; gynecology, obstetrics, orthopedics neurosurgery, ENT and insisted that staff physicians qualify in their specialties. In about 1904 he was the first surgeon in New Jersey to perform a gall bladder resection and over the years he published and lectured widely on medical subjects. A former colleague (Henry Brodtkin) once recalled Max as “our last angry man... always ‘angry’ at sham, pretentiousness, intellectual dishonesty and country club society.” He was a student of medical history, particularly the part played by Jewish physicians since early times, and would astound groups of physicians with his erudition, frequently quoting from the Bible or the Talmud.

Max’s wife Jenny helped acclimate immigrant women, teaching them useful trades such as sewing and organizing a cultural club to assist immigrants to acclimate themselves and learn English. In subsequent generations the family’s influence on the hospital’s development and culture was profound - among many family members who worked at Beth Israel were Victor’s brother Aaron on staff for 45 years, his son Eugene for 66 years (1923-1966) and VP2 who joined his father’s practice in 1955.

In March 1934 Dr. Danzis published a scholarly two part article “The Jew in Medicine” in *The American Hebrew and Jewish Tribune*. (Both in 1936 and 1941, together with Aaron Parsonnet, he reviewed the same subject in Newark’s daily newspaper *The Jewish Chronicle*.) Concerning the immigration of Russian Jews like himself to America during the late 19th century, Max wrote:

*Included in this number was a large proportion of young men belonging to that group of Russian youth who threw off the yoke of narrow dogma and traditional Jewish ritualism. They were the ones who strongly yearned for more modern and higher education. They knocked at the portals of the higher educational institutions in Europe but were told that only a very small percentage of their number could be admitted.*

In this article, after reviewing Jewish contributions to medicine, Max discussed the results of a survey he conducted of the nation’s 76 approved medical schools. He concluded that there was a national oversupply of doctors in numbers that was unequally

distributed in relation to population size. Approximately 4,000 of the country's 22,000 medical students were Jewish, roughly 18%, which was more than five fold greater than other groups. Moreover, greater than 90% of American medical students studying in Europe were Jewish (1,173 in 1932.)

Dr. Danzis found evidence of a quota system working against qualified Jewish applicants, especially in northeastern schools where after interviews students were denied entry on the basis of "ungentlemanly personality," deficient "magnetism" or absence of "professional inheritance." His conclusion was discreetly worded: "I do not believe that there is a purposeful or coordinated effort on the part of all medical schools to restrict or limit the number of Jewish students but there is a tendency in many schools to keep them within a certain limited number." He advised prospective medical students that "medicine is a jealous profession. It demands a great many sacrifices from those who wish to join its ranks. Be prepared to serve humanity in an altruistic manner; free from greed, selfishness and commercial tendencies....always ready to give cheerfully without any expectation of reward or public acclaim."

However, there was something more urgent on Max Danzis' mind than the problems of American Jewish students. By the 1930s restrictive immigration laws had closed America's "Golden Door" to millions of East Europeans fleeing Nazi Germany and in 1938-39 all Jewish doctors in Germany were deprived of the right to practice. Max Danzis was one of five New Jersey physicians who joined a National Committee for the Resettlement of Foreign Physicians (later renamed the National Refugee Service.) The main purposes were to gather statistics, serve an educational role and clarify misconceptions. (The other New Jersey members were Harrison Martland, Edward Sprague, Henry Berkhorn and Royal Schaaf.) A less public objective was to allocate immigrant physicians into underserved communities where there was need of more doctors and to prevent overcrowding in more desirable localities.

Between 1933 and 1940, more than 70% of some 5,000 immigrant physicians from Nazi Europe were Jewish; about 60% were able to receive licenses in fifteen states. Fearing competition, the Medical Society of New Jersey objected and in 1939 convinced the legislature to pass a law that all interns in the state had to be citizens; a law that was never enforced because the attorney general declared it to be unconstitutional. New Jersey was a medical wasteland located between New York and Pennsylvania with no medical school of its own and, because few American students wanted to train in the state,

hospitals in Newark and Jersey City were especially dependent on immigrants and other foreign medical graduates as their primary source of interns. An undocumented source suggested that largely through the efforts of Dr. Danzis, 131 immigrants settled in New Jersey and he personally bore the expense of bringing many of them to safety. But in his memoir VP2 noted that Grandpa Max “never spoke about the money - it was a topic that was shunned in the household, a vulgar subject.”

On February 12, 1934 Max Danzis wrote a letter to Senator Kay Pittman of Nevada, Chairman (1933-1940) of the Senate’s powerful Committee of Foreign Relations:

*As an American citizen practicing surgery in New Jersey, being aware of the conditions taking place in Germany, with reference to discrimination against Jews and Jewish physicians particularly, I wish to express my sincere approval of your Resolution (154) and I appeal to you to use your influence with the Senate to have it approved.*

Immediately after Adolf Hitler’s Nazi party assumed power in January 1933, they implemented anti-Semitic policies and now Chairman Pittman found himself in the middle of struggles between so-called “isolationists” and “internationalists.” A proposal by Senator Millard Tydings called upon President Roosevelt to unequivocally condemn events in Germany but was blocked through the efforts of Secretary of State Cordell Hull. The feeling was that this was not our country’s concern, that such an action would be embarrassing to the President and would prompt Germany to accuse us of hypocrisy; after all, Senator Tydings’ home state of Maryland had been the scene of lynchings that were neither prevented or punished.

Undeterred, in January 1934 Senator Tydings introduced Resolution 154, which Dr. Danzis was writing to support. This time he urged the Foreign Relations Committee itself, “as representatives of the people of the United States,” to express their “profound feelings of surprise and pain upon learning of the discriminations and oppressions imposed by the Reich upon its minority groups, including its Jewish citizens [and to convey] its earnest hope that the German Reich will speedily alter its policy [toward Jews] and restore civil and political rights and undo the wrong that have been done them.” Resolution 154 also died in committee. The next year the German government enacted the infamous Nuremberg Laws which institutionalized many of the racial theories that characterized Nazi ideology.

Sometime during the mid 1930s (the date is unclear), Max Danzis was honored by an organization that celebrated the contributions of foreign-born Americans. (His notes written on cue cards were discovered among his papers by VP2 only in 2013.) The following extracts from his acceptance speech seem particularly relevant today:

*Mr. Chairman, honored Guests, fellow Immigrants:*

*I deeply appreciate the honor that you are bestowing upon me this evening. I assure you that I am accepting it with a sincere feeling of humility. Awards of Meritorious Service always leave a lasting impression upon the recipient, even if the intent of the award far exceeds the individual's merit. After all, there is no special virtue in being helpful to your fellow-men. Civilized life would not have evolved without this human trait.*

*If I may be permitted to say a few words about the early period of my life, I may summarize it by stating that my problems were common to all immigrants during the process of adaptation to a new environment. This is particularly true of those who belong to minority groups who were forced to emigrate from their homeland because of the denial of their civil rights. These people look hopefully to a land of tolerance and opportunity, a land which one of our early immigrants chose to call the "promised land."*

*I must say that the process of adaptation to an entirely new condition of life is not an easy one for the immigrant even under the most favorable circumstances. Many find this period of struggle too hard to endure. Some take the road of least resistance and find it easier to travel with than against the stream. However, those who come here in the formative period of their lives bring with them ambition, enthusiasm, determination and an abiding conviction of ultimate success. To them these hardships act as a challenge to their ambition and a test of strength to their determination....*

*This has been aptly summarized by one of our American philosophers [Ralph Waldo Emerson] in these words: "When Man is pushed, tormented, and defeated he has a chance to learn something, He has been put on his wits. He has gained facts, and is cured of conceit." I, as one who in the very early and most impressionable period of my life keenly felt the "rod of the persecutor", deeply appreciate living in a society where the rights and privileges of a human being, regardless of his religion, race or national origin, are held sacred.*

*Whatever success I may have attained may be attributed to three main factors: 1. A Democratic country offering opportunities to all. 2. A state of society where a wide latitude is given to develop the trend of one's mental capacity or talent to the utmost of his ability. 3. The help and encouragement I received in molding my professional career from my wife who cheerfully shared and courageously bore with me all the hardships which we encountered in our early life. Her tireless interest in many social problems, such as adult education, health agencies and many others was really inspiring.*

*Most people are under the impression that life must be very hard for a young ambitious immigrant who has to earn his living at manual labor during his student days. That is not altogether true. Admitting that there are many physical hardships and inconveniences, there are also compensations. My most pleasant hours of the day during the years working at a bench were the evenings when I could retire in complete seclusion, away from the humdrum and sometimes the coarseness of a factory life, and become engrossed in my studies. On the surface one would think that I endured terrific hardships but I must say that all through these years, in spite of many difficulties, I never felt that life was hard. I had a goal in view. I had youth, I had ambition and foresight. Therefore, I looked forward to every evening which would bring me a step forward towards my educational goal.*

*I need not emphasize the responsibility of the immigrant to his adopted country. One of his main purposes and desires is to become a useful, dignified citizen and while the responsibility to the country of his adoption must be uppermost, nevertheless it is incumbent on him to be of help to those immigrants who come after him. May I also at this point make a plea for more liberal immigration laws which are needed now. Tens of thousands of displaced persons who [were] kept in concentration camps through no fault of their own, men in all walks of life, some of whom were members of professional groups, are seeking refuge in new countries to rebuild their shattered lives.*

*With our immense territory and unlimited economic opportunities, it is safe to state that the admission of several hundred thousand immigrants would in no way interfere with or hinder the opportunities of our citizens. As sons and daughters of immigrant groups, may I leave this thought with you. These displaced people need our help very badly.*

In 1949 on the occasion of Max Danzis' 75th birthday and 50 years since he entered the medical profession, Eugene Parsonnet lauded his father-in-law and former medical partner for his "rich, noble, gentle and genuine human life." The event was kept deliberately small affair befitting the modesty of the honoree:

*Despite the heights to which he rose in his professional activity, he never lost his association and contact with simple folk. He never knew sham or pretense or guile. He never lost the common touch because he always stayed with, and was concerned with the lot of the humble, common man. Their problems were his. Their worries were his. Their hopes and plans for a better future were etched in his spirit and furnished both a guide and a goal for his life's work.*

*He never forgot - indeed he disdained - to cast from his mind or from his heart the reality of his early struggles, his early misfortunes. The hardships and handicaps of those early days became the basis and the cornerstone for his life's hope and ambition. Indeed, it developed into a crusade that the obstacles which had been his, and the difficulties which he was required to encounter and surmount should not prove to be a barrier to mar the life and work and ambition of eager and alert young men of another generation. ....Dr. Danzis' mind, heart and spirit were all insistent that new avenues must be opened, in the democratic scheme of things, to furnish a full measure of opportunity for all aspiring, alert and eager young people who were touched by the fire for achievement and manifested the willingness to work.*

*It was with this basic concept...that he evolved and labored and toiled incessantly for the establishment of the Beth Israel Hospital which has now been for a generation a source of pride to our state and to the Jewish community. This hospital was Dr. Danzis' dream and the completion of the institution and its influence and importance were the result solely of his effort - a fact to which all of us here tonight can testify.*

*Dr. Danzis' story is the great American story. It is a story that bears repeating and reemphasizing. For his success, in the highest spiritual sense of the term, reflects the finest and noblest aspect of the American way of life.*

In 1950 Max Danzis was named the recipient of the UNICO Award as the Outstanding Naturalized Citizen of Newark, New Jersey. He was hailed as “a foe of social, racial and religious bigotry, and an inspiring guide and benefactor to countless people in all walks of life... The story of Dr. Max Danzis is a realization of the American Dream and as such, reminds us that only if we practice the Golden Rule more fully, shall we approach the ultimate goal of democracy.... The Brotherhood of Man.”

In 2000, when speaking at a dedication ceremony for the renamed Parsonnet/Danzis Auditorium, famed heart surgeon Dr. Victor Parsonnet recalled that the narrative of his two grandfathers was typical of the lives and backgrounds of many of the founders of Newark Beth Israel Hospital, virtually all of whom were immigrants from Southeastern Russia. Although freed from persecution, “they carried with them memories of what they left behind [and felt a need] to restore and improve upon a lost culture.” They were passionate about “education, self-advancement, and service to all, regardless of origins or ethnicity and these principles [still] define the creed of the hospital to this day.”

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Adapted from a chapter in Book Four of my series *Meanderings in Medical History*. Most of the content was extracted with permission from the unpublished memoir of Dr. Victor Parsonnet (VP2) and from his family’s archives that are housed at The Jewish Historical Society of New Jersey, Whippany, NJ.

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