

**Rivka Blak Sandler**

Interview by Martha K. Smith  
taped November 21, 1998, McLean, Virginia  
transcribed January 2003

As part of a writing course I was taking, I interviewed Dr. Sandler for a projected article on "Women of Achievement." She is the grandmother of two of my piano students, Nora and Jonathan Gayer. At age 80, she has light brown hair, smooth skin, and a very youthful, but unenhanced, appearance. In response to my spoken observations, she asserted that women should be honest about their age. "How else can people know how an 80-year old woman should look?"

Rivka Blak (also spelled Black) was born February 20, 1918 in Warsaw. Her mother was Lithuanian, and her father was born in Volynia in the Ukraine. There were eight children in the family, but she made it clear that she did not want to talk about them, since most of her family perished in the Holocaust. One sister, Luba, was with Rivka in Tel Aviv when Rivka first moved there and then lived in San Francisco until she died in 1996. Another sister, Chava (Eva), ran away from Poland to Siberia with her new husband and a younger brother only ten days before the war started. She still lives in Israel. That sister blames herself for complying with her father's wish that her brother should return to Poland for better schooling than was available in Siberia. He and his brother-in-law really got along well together and had he stayed in Siberia, he might have survived the war. Rivka described her brother as "brilliant—he would have been another Einstein,"

Rivka recalled that her father, a lumber businessman, was always reading on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, or whenever he was not working. She believes that her own passion for reading followed her father's example. Rivka attended a private secondary school, where she learned French (instead of German, as she would have in a public school), and finished at age sixteen. Before leaving for University, she taught French to a poor, 12-year old student, who later led the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and was killed by the Nazis. The nickname Rivka gave to him was "Aniolek," or "angel," short for Anielewiech. In the uprising he was known as Aniolek.

Beginning in 1935 Rivka attended the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. She already knew some Hebrew and learned English by reading English-language newspapers systematically: first the headlines, then short paragraphs, then complete articles. She remained in Jerusalem during War World II. Having completed the research for a PhD in endocrinology, she worked for Bernard Zondek, a gynecologist who was developing a new pregnancy test. At 29 she married Ludwig (Yehuda) Sandler, a physical chemist whom she met at the Hebrew University. When, after the War, the University came under the jurisdiction of Jordan, she became a lecturer in Tel Aviv, but had no laboratory equipment with which to work. Their first child, David, was born in Israel in 1948.

Rivka loved living in Jerusalem. She particularly remembers an amphitheater with the Jordan River on one side and the old city of Jerusalem on the other and says that she would love to be buried there. When her sister Luba died in 1996, her sister Eva took the ashes to Jerusalem. She talks to her sister Eva every Saturday and has returned there to visit. She can't find anyone who she knew at the Hebrew University, however. She says she buys a lottery ticket every week in hopes of leaving a large legacy to the Hebrew University.

In 1950, her husband obtained a fellowship with the national Research Council in Ottawa, Canada. Rivka got a lectureship at the Catholic University of Ottawa, because they needed to fill a quota of non-Catholics. "Much of what you do is pure luck," she commented. The Chairman of her department was an Irish Catholic, who was very kind, but kept trying to convert her. Rivka maintains that they adapted to life in Canada and the U.S. readily, because these countries had the best jobs for scientists.

In 1952, Rivka's husband became a research fellow at M.I.T. and they moved to Newton, Massachusetts. Their daughter Judy was born in Boston. Soon they moved to Pittsburgh, where her husband was hired as a researcher for Westinghouse. Rivka stayed home with the children until Judy was seven. Then she found a position in the Medical School at the University of Pittsburgh. Her first assignment was a dream for her, reading all day in the library about the latest advances in endocrinology, a field that had been revolutionized by advances in radiology. The reason she was assigned "reading research" was that she wasn't any longer qualified to do "bench research." The fifteen years between her last laboratory work in 1946 and her appointment in 1961 was a time of rapid change in her field.

From 1961 through 1992, Dr. Sandler was Professor at the University of Pittsburgh Center for Medicine and Health-related Professions. She taught courses mostly to graduate students. She says that she preferred the friendships of male colleagues and had little time for female gossip. She once wrote an article with a difficult man who had a great wife, who became her friend. The only problems she encountered were not the result of discrimination against women, but envy from other women, especially of her success in obtaining research grants. "Success," she says, "is mostly luck, but also persistence and willingness to take jobs no one else wanted."

The new field of Aging was an area no one else wanted, but the University needed someone to teach it. There were no books available then, just articles. She had to construct her own curriculum, hire a statistician and embark on epidemiological research. Her work took her to meetings all over the world—Japan, Europe, Hawaii. When she retired in 1992 at age 74, she was named Professor Emeritus. Her greatest joy continues to be reading and studying. She says she has always had to force herself to take walks.

Rivka is worried about the survival of the state of Israel. She loves America, which she calls the “hope of the world,” but thinks Israel needs more financial support. Rivka became a U.S. citizen because she likes America and identifies with it. “England is too weak; France, too envious. It falls to America to bring the rest of the world to freedom.”

“I was in Israel when Israel was proclaimed a nation. I realize there is no defense against terrorism. I knew most of the terrorists against the British colonialists in Israel then because most of them were from Poland, like Menachem Begin. During the siege of Jerusalem, I volunteered, but they wouldn’t accept me for the Hagganah, because I was friendly with the Irgun (far left revolutionaries). My husband, who was from Germany, was accepted as a member of the Hagganah. We were divorced after Judy went to college. He returned to Israel, where he died in 1989 at age 76.

After retirement, Rivka studied religion and wrote an article about the negative perceptions some people have about Jews. “I remember when I was 8 or 9,” she says, “that I had a Polish friend, Cesia. We played hopscotch. She kept losing and got mad at me. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘but you killed my God!’ I still remember how improbable it sounded. ‘If your God can be killed,’ I said, ‘I will jump all over him.’ I was furious and kept jumping up and down.”

Rivka’s niece in Israel occasionally conducts tours of Poland. Once she saw a picture in a Polish Cathedral of stereotypical Jews killing Christian children for blood to make matzoh. Rivka wrote a letter to the Pope in the Vatican protesting the display of this picture and received a note from a papal emissary saying that they “had taken note of her letter.” Her voice dripped with disgust while relating this story.

When I inquired about the source of Nora and Jonathan’s musical talent, Rivka attributed it to her husband and to their father’s family. She said that Judy had taken piano lessons as a child. She herself loved to attend concerts in Pittsburgh, but is no longer confident about going out at night. She says she knew many artists in Israel. She terms herself a non-observant Jew, but lights a candle on Yom Kippur and prays in Hebrew for her friends and family.

In conclusion, Rivka Sandler asserts that her life has not been extraordinary, only that she has enjoyed some good luck and some happy coincidences.