

BELLA WERETNIKOW

Seattle's First Jewish Female Attorney

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In the University of Washington's 1900 yearbook, the *Tyee*, there is a photo of the staff of *Pacific Wave*, the students' literary publication. Seated in front, far right, is a young woman looking directly at the camera. In 1900 she received bachelor of arts and bachelor of pedagogy degrees, and in 1901 she graduated with the first class of the University of Washington School of Law. She was admitted to the Washington State Bar on June 6, 1901, and then went to work for a Seattle attorney. This young woman was Bella Weretnikow, Seattle's first Jewish female attorney.

Only a few women in Washington preceded Bella into a career in law. Leila J. Robinson and Mary Leonard were admitted to the Washington Territorial Bar in 1884, Reah Whitehead to the Washington State Bar in 1893, and then Othilia G. Carroll and Bella in 1901. Carroll was one of Bella's law school classmates and the daughter of a federal judge. She married another member of that first graduating class, Walter B. Beals, who later became a State Supreme Court judge and, following World War II, served as presiding judge over Military Tribunal No. 1 of the Nuremburg doctors' trials.

In contrast to Othilia Carroll, Bella Weretnikow's origins were much more humble. She was the daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants. Her mother was an illiterate shopkeeper; her stepfather was an alcoholic; and her younger half-brother was mentally impaired. In Seattle the family lived behind her mother's waterfront store, and Bella was too embarrassed by her life's circumstances to invite her childhood school friends home to visit and play. Nonetheless, Seattle offered Bella extraordinary educational opportunities. Intelligent and highly motivated, she made her dreams come true.

An 11-Year Journey

The Weretnikows left Russia in the early 1880s seeking better luck and greater opportunities in "America." It was Bella's birth that pushed her parents even further into poverty. Bella's father, Zachariah, was a Talmudic scholar who devoted himself to his studies. Thus, the support of this small family fell on the shoulders of Bella's mother, Eliza. In order to raise the money needed to pay for the journey to America, Eliza sold their few possessions as well as her own beautiful red hair, which she greatly prized. Previously, Eliza had refused to cut off her hair, even though it was the Orthodox Jewish custom for women upon marrying. However, to raise the funds needed to leave Russia, she sold her hair to the shop where she had made wigs as a girl.

The family traveled from Russia to Germany where they boarded a ship bound for New York. After arriving at Castle Garden, the immigrant landing depot on the southern tip of Manhattan Island, they were sent to settle in Winnipeg. In fact, during May and June of 1882 about 400

Russian Jewish refugees were settled in Winnipeg. The Winnipeg newspapers often ridiculed these new arrivals, describing them as idle, useless, and unclean. Nonetheless, many of these early settlers remained in Winnipeg, prospering and founding a vibrant Jewish community that continues to flourish today.

Even in Winnipeg, Eliza and Zachariah Weretnikow's struggles continued. They remained poor, and by 1890 their marriage had ended. Eliza tried her hand at peddling and then opened a small secondhand shop in front of her shanty. Although Eliza could never read or write, she believed very strongly in education for her daughter and insisted that Bella attend public school in Winnipeg. Bella loved school and greatly enjoyed reading. As Bella wrote in her memoirs,

I really loved books, much more than toys or dolls and soon started to acquire a library of my own. This I accomplished by saving tiny silver five-cent pieces, then common in Canada, which I hid under an oilcloth tacked on a shelf in the kitchen in back of the store. When I had accumulated a nice little pile of these five-cent pieces, I made a trip to the secondhand book shop. I was then about seven or eight years old and chief among my collection was a copy of Gibbons' "Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire." I am still at a loss to remember whether it was the binding or the price that was the attraction, as it was not until years later that I was able to read and understand the book."

One can only speculate as to why, after 11 years, Bella's family left Winnipeg by train and moved to Seattle. In addition to the extremely cold winters (which Bella claimed were colder than those in Russia), Winnipeg was in an economic slump, other friends of the family had already relocated to the West Coast, and anti-Semitism still prevailed. About their arrival in Seattle she wrote,

In the year 1893, the entire country, Seattle included, was in the depths of one of the worst depressions it has ever experienced. This was the year we arrived in Seattle. Even the railroad station, a small frame building, where we landed and were met by our old friends from Winnipeg, was a very depressing spectacle. Once it had been painted, but there was little, if any, trace of paint left. It was weather-beaten, dilapidated, and in no way compared to the fine depot of the Canadian Pacific Railroad we had left behind in Winnipeg. Of course, we could not know that plans for the erection of a new station were under consideration at the time. Furthermore, we did not know that the tangled network of short railroad tracks, just in front of the station, and all leading down to the waterfront, would ever mean anything to us. It was all quite bewildering although... picturesque... little did we realize that this busy waterfront would become the source of our livelihood and the means of our support. Around this section were all kinds of shops catering to the transient trade, the sailors, loggers, stevedores, and other waterfront workers. Here is where we were soon located, and opened our little store.

A New Life in Seattle

Eliza opened a shop on Skid Road, and by 1894 Bella was enrolled in Seattle's Central School. She was, however, growing impatient with high school and indicated in her diary that she would try to enter the University of Washington by passing the entrance exams:

I had just passed my sixteenth year when I went out to the University to go through, what I thought, would be a terrible ordeal. I was always small for my age, and perhaps looked even younger than I was, with my hair hanging down my back in long curls. Also, I imagine, being Jewish, I looked very different from the average college girl... I think I must have looked terribly scared, as I was very hesitant about going into the Registrar's Office. At this juncture, a tall red-haired scholarly looking man stopped and asked if he could help me, and, to me, he was an angel in disguise. As it turned out, he was one of the Board of Examiners. He took me in charge and was

of very great help thru the entire series of examinations. He was one of the most famous professors, Edmond S. Meany, teacher, historian, and scholar.... He taught American history and specialized in Northwest history. He gave me several of the examinations orally, and the rest were in writing. Perhaps no one was more surprised than I when I found I had successfully passed them all, and became a full-fledged college student.

On September 2, 1896, Bella began her studies at the university. Meanwhile, the Klondike gold rush was bringing prosperity to Seattle, and business picked up in Eliza's store. A large sign was displayed saying "Alaska Outfitters," and "We Pay Cash for Gold Nuggets," and in the front window a pair of apothecary's scales and some gold nuggets were displayed. Bella kept the shop well stocked:

Being the official buyer for our store, even though still attending the University, I scoured the larger shops on First and Second Avenues. Having exhausted their stocks, I went to the wholesale houses, and bought up all the rubber boots, mackinaws, blankets, pick axes and other available merchandise with which we were doing a phenomenal business. The demand became so great that the supply was never nearly enough.

Even when the Gold Rush quieted down, Eliza's store apparently continued doing well, catering to the shipping and tourist trades.

Bella evidently enjoyed her years at the university and excelled in her studies. On May 31, 1900, she received her two bachelor's degrees, majoring in political and social science, with honors in German. Moreover, during her senior undergraduate year, she had enrolled in law school, concurrently completing her final year of undergraduate work and her first year of legal studies.

The "New" School of Law

The University of Washington School of Law opened its doors in the old University Building in downtown Seattle in 1899. The basic entry requirements included being at least 18 years of age and either passing an examination "in respect to general education" or presenting a diploma from a college or accredited high school. Bella's transcript shows that her course of study included classes in jurisprudence, contracts, torts, property, agency, pleading, criminal law, procedure, how to find law, administrative law, equity, persons, evidence, private corporations, carriers, bankruptcy, moot court, partnership, damages, and liens. In addition, candidates for a law degree were required to write a senior thesis "of not less than forty folios in length, upon some legal topic selected by the student and approved by the faculty." The subject of Bella's thesis was "Community Debt."

In the days of its infancy, the law school's doors were apparently open to anyone who could meet the entrance requirements and pay the fees. Bella wrote:

The first class comprised about thirty students, three of whom, myself included, were females. One girl was a teacher of political economy in the Seattle High School, another was reading law in her father's office, and I was determined to have a career of my own.... The fact that I was Jewish did not seem to have any significance at the time. There was only one other Jewish student in the class, a young man named Aubrey Levy. Also there was one Negro, two Japanese, and a couple of middle-aged politicians who soon dropped out, ostensibly for lack of time.... The principal and only full-time teacher was an able lawyer named John Condon. The remainder of the so-called faculty volunteered their services.

John T. Condon was the first dean of the School of Law and its first instructor. Aubrey Levy was from a prominent Jewish Seattle family, a talented musician, and Seattle public schoolteacher.

Like Bella, he had received a BA degree from the university in 1900. Levy graduated from the Law School in 1902 and established a successful law practice in Seattle. The female classmates to whom Bella referred were, respectively, Adele Parker and the previously mentioned Othilia Carroll. Prior to her graduation from the law school in 1903, Parker had taught political economy and civil government at Broadway High School. The "Negro" was William McDonald Austin, from Barbados, who graduated in 1902 and practiced law in the Philippines. Jinta Yamaguchi and Takuji Yamashita were the two Japanese law students to whom Bella referred.

While Bella notes the diversity among her classmates, she seems unaware of how unusual it was at the turn of the century for women to attend law school and to enter this male-dominated profession. In fact, while some law schools allowed women to attend, they sometimes were not permitted to participate in the graduation ceremonies; some states refused to admit women to the Bar, and most women found it extremely difficult to find a position as a practicing lawyer. Parker, Carroll, and Weretnikow seemingly avoided these difficulties. On May 29, 1901, thirteen men and two women (Carroll and Weretnikow) received their Bachelors of Law degrees. Shortly thereafter, the class traveled to Olympia to apply for admission to the Bar and to take the required exams; everyone passed.

Weretnikow and Carroll tried and won their first cases in King County Superior Court. A June 16, 1901, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* headline proclaimed, "Women Attorneys in Court." According to this article, Bella was working in the law office of Frederick R. Burch. How long Bella worked there is unknown. Bella always minimized the significance of her legal career and later wrote,

I never did any trial work or anything spectacular, but I did acquire a practice in making contracts, drawing wills, and examining abstracts of title to properties, etc. Besides my practice, I looked after property belonging to my mother, improving it with buildings and apartments.

Marriage to L. N. Rosenbaum

Nonetheless, like many a young woman of her day, Bella's career was cut short by marriage. We will never know if she had any marital prospects among the eligible men of Seattle, but the way she made the acquaintance of her future husband was most unusual. Some of the Jewish newspapers picked up the story of Bella Weretnikow's graduation from law school. One of these was the *American Israelite*, which circulated nationally and carried Jewish news from states across the country. In the June 6, 1901, edition, at the end of a gossip column reporting on Jewish organizations, Bar Mitzvahs, synagogue news, and upcoming weddings in Seattle, there are two short sentences reading, "Among the graduates of the University Law School is Miss Bella Weretnikow. Miss Weretnikow received her bachelor's degree only last year."

Somehow, this notice caught the eye of a young attorney in Nashville, Tennessee—Lewis Newman (L. N.) Rosenbaum.

It must have been my name, Bella Weretnikow, a distinct Russian-Jewish name, that attracted the attention of the Jewish newspapers at the time. It seems they did their best to broadcast the story of a young Jewish girl becoming one of the first women lawyers in the far West. I received many letters of congratulation. One of them was from another lawyer by the name of Lewis N. Rosenbaum of Nashville, Tennessee. He had read the story in the "American Israelite".... He sent me a congratulatory message saying that he would be interested in any information about Washington and particularly about Seattle. I must have written some glowing accounts, as very soon he decided to come and see it all for himself."

Like Bella, L. N. Rosenbaum was the child of poor Jewish immigrant parents. His family came from Hungary, settling in New York City around 1897. He dropped out of public school at an early age and headed to Nashville. There, he obtained work in the law offices of Moreau P. Estes. As told by Bella,

He was allowed to sleep in the office and was paid the munificent sum of three dollars per week as legal assistant. Here he had an opportunity to study law books and help in the practice of law. After a year or so, he was considered qualified and was given a certificate to practice before the Bar in Tennessee.

Official records confirm that L. N. Rosenbaum was admitted to the Tennessee Bar Association on March 4, 1901. By 1903 Rosenbaum was living in Seattle, and on February 9 of that year he was admitted to the Washington State Bar. In those days one did not have to graduate from law school to become a lawyer. In fact, at that time in the state of Washington, an individual who "had already been admitted to practice in the higher courts of other states," did not even need to take the examination for admission to the bar.

On March 19, 1905, Bella and L. N. were married in the home of Eliza Marks (Bella's mother) at 917 East Jefferson Street. The wedding was officiated by Theodore F. Joseph, the first rabbi of Seattle's Temple de Hirsch. L. N. eventually left the practice of law as he became increasingly interested in real estate and finance. Typical of many women at that time, Bella gave up practicing law to raise the couple's five children. Later she would jokingly say, "All these years the only law that I have practiced has been to try to lay down the law to my husband and our family." Bella and L. N. sometimes lived in Seattle, sometimes in New York. Their marriage lasted 50 years, only ending with L. N.'s death in 1956. Four years later Bella Weretnikow Rosenbaum, Seattle's first Jewish female attorney, passed away at the age of 80.

Judith W. Rosenthal lives in New Jersey and is a professor of biological sciences at Kean University. Bella Weretnikow and L. N. Rosenbaum were her maternal grandparents.