Lena Kenin (1897-1968)

Lena Nemerovsky Kenin was born in Portland on November 5, 1897, the third youngest of six children born to David and Naomi (Swartz) Nemerovsky. Kenin attended Reed College and graduated from the University of Washington in 1921. That November, she married Philadelphian Harry Kenin and spent the next three years teaching school. She enrolled at the University of Oregon Medical School in 1924, earning her M.D. in 1929. After interning at Good Samaritan Hospital in Portland, she set up a practice in obstetrics and gynecology that would flourish for over twenty-five years. The couple had no children.

Lena Kenin was a secular thinker who was mostly uninvolved in religious Jewish life, although her husband Harry served a term as president of the B'nai B'rith Lodge and was affiliated with Temple Beth Israel in Portland. Trained as a lawyer, Harry served in the Oregon State Senate, on the Portland school board, and on the state's Welfare Commission before his premature death in 1954. Lena was a life-long Democrat, and in 1947 she registered with the Americans for Democratic Action.

Popular lore suggests that Kenin delivered at least half the Jewish babies in Portland. That joyful responsibility brought unexpected challenges, as expectant mothers in the mid-1950s were generally much more private than mothers are today and many of Kenin's patients wanted to keep their pregnancies secret. To accommodate them, Kenin redesigned her office so that mothers-to-be could exit through a second door, reducing the risk that they would meet friends or acquaintances in the waiting room.

Kenin felt ill-prepared to offer emotional support to new mothers, so in 1958 she enrolled in a psychiatric program at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School. After residency at John Hopkins and the Philadelphia Hospital for Mental and Nerve Disorders, she returned to Portland in 1961 to establish a practice in psychiatry. Her dual interest in obstetrics and psychiatry led to a 1962 article, "Mental Illness Associated with the Postpartum State," which she co-authored with Norman Blass in the journal *Clinical Obstetrics and Gynecology*.

While maintaining her private practice, Kenin was an associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Oregon Medical School and chief consultant for the school's health services. She also was active in the Oregon Medical Association, the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, Multnomah County Medical Society, the National Birth Control League, and other professional organizations.

At the time of her death on March 24, 1968, at age seventy, Lena Kenin had become one of the first women in Oregon to distinguish herself in three medical fields—obstetrics, gynecology, and psychiatry. Her pioneering work with postpartum depression put Oregon at the forefront of that nascent field of study.

Written by Judy Margles

Further Reading:

Kenin, L., and Blass, N. "Mental Illness Associated with the Postpartum State." *Clinical Obstetrics and Gynecology* 5 (1962), 716-728.

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