

A Most Unlikely Pioneer

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How did a sickly girl, born in Russia and who grew up in a Boston tenement, become the physical education instructor at prestigious Smith College and, in 1892, at the age of 23, have the foresight and courage to introduce a team game, basketball, to women? This paper will offer some explanations of the circumstances that led Senda Berenson to become a most unlikely pioneer.

Senda's father, Albert Valvrojenski, married Judith Mickelshanski when he was, nineteen and she seventeen. The following year they had a son, Bernard, then, Senda, born on March 19, 1868, and two years later, another son, Abie. The family lived with Senda's maternal grandparents in a shelter in the Pale of Settlement, the land set aside for Jewish families in western Russia.

Senda's father, small and wiry, worked as a logger, despised his station in life, and often scolded his children. Bernard, the favorite child, had a deep bond with his sickly younger sister. Early in 1875, when Senda was about five, her grandfather's house burned, leaving the family homeless. Jewish life in Russia had become more precarious and the decision was made for Senda's father to emigrate to America. Senda's mother and brothers followed a year later.

The family lived in a few rooms in Boston's dingy West End where Senda's father became a peddler. He insisted that the family become as American as possible. Berenson became the family name; only English could be spoken; and all connections with the Jewish religion severed. By 1880 two more daughters had been born and Mr. Berenson became a United States citizen. Life remained difficult. Mrs. Berenson served lunches to workers and, at times, took in sewing.

Senda, always sickly, apparently attended school, but never finished a year. Bernard, on the other hand, obtained an excellent education, graduating from Harvard and then going abroad to continue his studies. He never returned to live in the United States. Bernard and Senda carried on an extensive correspondence. Three pertinent themes emerge from their letters: first, the continuing alterations of Senda with her father; second, Senda's education; and third, Senda's future. Senda apparently; attempted to take music lessons with the idea of becoming a music teacher, but gave up because of her ill health.

In desperation she sought help from the newly opened Boston Normal School of Gymnastics. There she found strong, kindly guidance from Claes Enebuske, the gymnastics instructor who led her back to health, and Amy Morris Homans, the director of the school. She also found a sense of belonging which she had not experienced.

In the middle of her second year at the school Homans suggested that she go to Smith College as the physical education instructor. This position, very socially acceptable, permitted her to leave the West End tenement and the difficult life with her father. Senda, new to teaching and to the college community, became excited when she saw the new game of basket ball. She like the game and believed it would enhance her program at Smith. She introduced it to her students, not realizing that she had changed the course of women's sport.