

Labors

by Kristina Gaddy

*Was it time yet?*

Fannie moved around her family's part of the house, probably going about her regular housework, cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry. Her two-year old daughter might have been toddling around the wood floors. Slowly but at regular intervals, a tightening started radiating across Fannie's belly, becoming more and more painful each time. She had been through this before, but memory does a good job of forgetting about pain. The contractions, now coming closer and closer together meant the baby was ready. The next hours would be painful, scary, and exhausting, and Fannie knew she needed Tante Rosa.

*Come, now.*

Rosa Fineberg stepped out of her house on the crisp fall day in November 1908 with a large, black bag in her hand. Her leather shoes touched the uneven stones beneath her feet, her tall stature made smaller by the two- and three-story row houses that surrounded her. On the corner a grocery store advertised wares in Yiddish. Just around the corner was the Russiche Schul, where Rosa attended services every Friday night, and around the next corner was the kosher meat market, where much to the dismay of the health department the butcher kept chickens in the basement. These blocks of Baltimore were her home now.

She made her way down Lombard street to South Exeter street to Fannie Witten's home. This was a walk she had made before and a walk she would make again. She stepped up to the three-story brick house, her hair piled atop her head and her waist cinched in with a corset. Tante Rosa was a midwife, and she checked in on her mothers leading up to a due date. A midwife looked for the highest point on a mother's belly, determined how many weeks had passed and how many days were left before baby arrived, and would stop in to make sure the pregnancy was developing normally.

In this neighborhood of Jonestown, there were at least thirteen other practicing Russian Jewish midwives and across the city, 150 white, Black, immigrant, and native-born women delivered some 4,000 babies that year. Fannie trusted Rosa above all the others and two years ago, had called her to deliver her daughter Sarah. Women like Fannie wanted women like Rosa. Women called midwives in their neighborhood, who spoke their language, who knew their culture. Women had faith in midwives, and Fannie had faith in Rosa.

That faith might not have stopped questions from racing through Fannie's mind. Flashes of fear could come like a whirlwind. What if she fell ill with an infection? Who would take care of little Sarah if she died? Who would take care of the family? What if the baby went blind from an eye infection? Women and babies died in and after labor, and labor could cause serious injuries. One out of every eight babies didn't reach her first birthday, and for every thousand pregnant women, almost seven died as a result of childbearing. In her lifetime, Fannie would lose a baby and chances were she already knew a woman who had died in labor.

The comfort of the midwife was concrete, yet undefinable: the comfort of being at home with a trusted neighbor; of knowing the midwife had your interest at the top of her priorities; of time, patience, and being listened to. The rumor in the neighborhood was that a simple touch of Rosa's hand could make pain and fear vanish. In 1908, the doctors at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore couldn't offer much in the way of pain management. Rosa's own daughter wondered why Rosa had this healing power, and had appreciated it during her own labors.

Inside the brick house, Rosa might have seen Sarah Ellovitz and her children, who shared this row home with the Wittens. Sarah and Fannie's husbands were both tailors, working six days a week, ten hours a day in factories or sweatshops in the neighborhood. In the summer of 1908, Sarah had given birth to her second child, and although almost 12 years older than 26-year-old Fannie, they were now experiencing motherhood together.

Fannie breathed and pushed. The baby was coming, forcing himself out of the uterus and into the birth canal.

Rosa pulled out her black bag. Sometimes people whispered that she must have kept gold coins in there. In reality, she probably didn't keep more money than the five to ten dollars she was paid to deliver a baby. Instead, she would keep tools to make her job easier: needles and catgut sutures, clean gauze or cotton cloth, soap, a medicine that stimulated contractions called ergot, maybe boric acid. She knew about antiseptics and keeping the area around her patients clean. She needed to have clean sheets, an extra pad to soak up blood and fluids, and boiled water to clean mother and baby.

Rosa would examine Fannie to make sure the baby was properly placed with his head facing down inside the uterus. Any other position was called a breech, dangerous for both the mother and child. If the baby remained in that position as labor progressed, Rosa would call for a doctor. She would press her ear against a cone that rested on Fannie's belly to listen for the baby's heartbeat too. Anything unusual in the tick-tick rhythm could tell her if something was about to go wrong.

Fannie's water broke.

The pain came, at closer and closer intervals, and Fannie might not have been able to speak through it.

*Push.*

When the pains got very close, Rosa knew she would have to clean the vulva and inner surfaces of Fannie's thighs. She would use hot water and soap to make sure the mother was as clean as possible.

Was the tick-tick of the baby's heart still steady and strong? Rosa listened for signs of distress, which could indicate that the umbilical cord was wrapped around the baby's neck. With clean hands, Rosa could also apply pressure to the skin around the vaginal opening to feel how far down the baby's head was.

Then, as the cervix became fully dilated, the baby moved into the birth canal. A sudden panic struck Fannie. She'd had this feeling before and knew there was nothing to worry about. Had this been her first child, the panic could have been chilling. The pain is a natural biological process to warn the mother that in this next stage of labor, she should not be alone. For the uninitiated, the floor is disappearing, there is no salvation. Even knowing the feeling, Fannie may have screamed out for help. Rosa knew this was when Fannie had to start pushing in earnest.

With each contraction, Fannie had to push, going against her instincts. She was already in pain, and with each push she created more pain for herself. With each push, the head was moving farther down the birth canal, expanding the soft tissue, even causing small tears. Sweating, grunting, tightening, clenching. This was labor.

The baby's head emerged first, and even if everything had gone well until this point, there was still the chance for complications. Rosa had to check to make sure the cord was not wrapped around the baby's neck. If the cord was, and it was still loose, Rosa could slip it over the baby's head immediately. If the cord was tight, and the baby's face looked discolored and distressed, he was choking. She'd have to cut the cord immediately and extract him as fast as possible. For a normal birth, Rosa would simply grab the baby and help him out.

He took his first breath and loud, forceful cries would have let everyone know he was alright. Rosa could not move him too far before she cut the umbilical cord. The cord was still attached to the placenta inside Fannie, and even the slightest tug could cause her more discomfort. When it ceased to pulsate with blood, Rosa clamped the cord in two places and cut in between. She scooped up the baby boy and put him in a blanket and to the side, perhaps in a bassinet or anything that could function as a bed for the time being. Fannie's job wasn't done.

The placenta still needed to come out. If the organ that had helped nourish her baby did not come out properly, Fannie might get an infection, which easily led to death. If the placenta was removed improperly, excessive bleeding could also kill her. Fannie needed to push more. She was physically exhausted, her body covered in sweat, and perhaps her birth canal even injured with tears. Pushing more was probably the last thing she wanted to do, but she had to. Once the placenta was out, she could hold her little baby boy.

*Now you can rest.*

Rosa cleaned up mother, baby, and the house as part of her job. She returned for a whole week after the birth to take care of mother and baby. A midwife provided healthcare for women, for her neighbors, most of whom could not afford a doctor. She also provided help. Fannie would have been separated from her husband for seven nights for religious reasons, and Max's unrelenting work hours meant he didn't have time to take care of Fannie or the family. But little Sarah still needed care, the family still needed meals, laundry, and a tidy house, and a newborn needed everything. The baby had to be fed every four to five hours and he needed clean diapers and clothes, which had to be washed outside since the house didn't have running water and Baltimore had no municipal sewers. Big Sarah could only help so much, she had her own family. The Wittens were only a family of four, most of the families Rosa attended had three or more children, sometimes Rosa was there to deliver the 11th, 12th, or 13th baby. Simple household help was something that Rosa, and most midwives, did for mothers they attended.

To people outside this social class, women like Rosa were a faceless, nameless entity, simply known as the midwife, and were not always considered a benefit to the community. Only some had real professional training, and some didn't even speak English, and many middle and upper-class Americans were increasingly convinced that the midwife did more harm than good to mothers. For families in Jonestown, life without the midwife was unimaginable.

Perhaps that day the baby was born, or perhaps it was eight days later after he was officially named at his Brit Milah, Rosa Fineberg took out one of her little red record books and filled out the eleventh page. The form had spaces for: 1. Sex; No. Child of Mother; 2. Name of Child; 3. Race or Color; 4. Date; 5. Place of Birth; 6. Full Name of Mother; 7. Mother's Maiden Name; 8. Mother's Birthplace; 9. Full Name of Father; 10. Father's Occupation; and 11. Father's Birthplace. This page was how she officially recorded baby Julius's birth, and informally, she added one more knot to a string of more than 1,000 knots she carried with her, one for each baby she delivered.