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## **Week 11 Reading**

### APA Referencing

Chappell, T. (2004). *The Persian blanket: The life of Janina Milek* (pp. 13–23). Fremantle Press.

### Referencing for Family History

Tim Chappell, *The Persian blanket: The life of Janina Milek*, Fremantle Press, Fremantle, 2004, pp. 13–23.

## ONE

When I came to this planet I had a very difficult trip. It took two and a half days. The doctor gave my poor mother 'oil and screw' but nothing helped. The labour went on and on and my mother began to think that I had come from hell. Somehow I arrived, but came out quiet, unconscious and blue. I couldn't take a deep enough breath because most of the life had been squeezed out of me.

At that time in Poland the old-fashioned Catholic religion was everywhere and it was said that if a baby was born and not christened it went to hell. The priests said that in hell there was a constant fire burning and you burn there for ages and ages in this hot fire. If I died before my christening I would be put on this fire. My mother thought I had come from hell but she did not want me to go back there, so arrangements were quickly made to have a christening at the local church and then I would go to heaven. Things would be a little bit better. Heaven, it was said, got cold sometimes, particularly when it snowed, but there were angels there that had brooms and swept the snow away. It was considerably better than hell.

So I was having trouble breathing and everyone thought I would die. I was born at two o'clock in the afternoon and at three o'clock they took me to church for the christening.

I was christened Janina.

Now I was in a better position. I would go to heaven. The priest was in a better position too. He got money.

Then they waited for me to pass away. For the next week I remained quiet and each day they thought, this is the end, today she will die. But after one week I was still alive and I think I surprised everyone.

Then I started to scream. I screamed continuously.

They said it was better when I was quiet.

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## *Junket*

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It was late afternoon and Jeremy and I were looking forward to an evening with Janine. We crept into the kitchen and peered into the fridge.

'Look at that,' I said, pointing but not daring to touch.

There stood the quivering pink junket in four small bowls.

Two each.

Jeremy leaned forward to touch one of the bowls.

'Don't,' I hissed from bitter experience. 'It shows your fingers.'

I shut the door. We had seen enough. It was going to be the complete Janine experience. French toast and junket, followed by as much television as we wanted.

Sure enough, when Mum and Dad and my older brother and sister were preparing to leave, we caught Janine beating eggs with a fork. She never used the egg beater or any electrical equipment in the kitchen.

'French toast?' cried Jeremy.

Janine smiled without showing her teeth and whisked. 'Maybe,' she said.

'Yay?' we both shouted.

'Oh, well,' laughed Janine as if she had just been presented with a surprise birthday cake.

'And junket?' I asked.

She continued to whisk. 'You like junket?'

'Yay!' we cried, higher and louder.

'Then maybe we have junker tonight, if Tim and Jeremy like.'

'Yay,' we cried again, shouting and dancing around her, chanting, 'junker, junker, junker.'

Janine laughed. 'Children, they children.'

Then I remembered. 'But we have no stale bread!' Janine always insisted that French toast could only be made with stale bread. You did not waste fresh bread on French toast.

'That is okay. I bring from my place,' she said.

We resumed dancing. Janine thought of everything.

'Janine for Queen, Janine for Queen,' we shouted.

Thus began an evening of joy.

Later, when Janine clapped her hands to tell us it was bedtime, I looked at her with my usual concern. 'Would she remember our agreement? 'Now it is off to bed,' she said, and gave me a little nod.

It was the perfect nod. Subtle, discreet yet unmistakable. Message understood. We went to bed, and I waited.

I had the upper bunk, above a cupboard, while Jeremy slept in the lower. He would be asleep in three minutes. It seemed he only had two modes of operating, frenzied energy or dead to the world. He was amazing. It took me much longer to fall asleep. I couldn't stop thinking about things.

I kept my eyes wide open and watched. The minutes ticked by. At last I felt sure he was asleep. As quietly as I could, I got out of bed, climbed down the bunk ladder, and tiptoed out of the room.

Janine was waiting for me with our card game. We called it 'Flower'. It was a memory game with cards of European flowers that had to be turned up in pairs. I liked it best when only two people were playing. It was a time I looked forward to, just Janine

and me. We played it over and over. I would often win but had a sense that Janine wasn't trying very hard. In fact she hardly ever won. While I was playing I would chat away about what was going on and ask Janine about her life.

Often the game would be forgotten as Janine told me stories about Poland and what life was like for her as a little girl in eastern Europe.

I listened with rapt attention to tales of long days at harvest and storytelling on cold winter nights, of Polish customs and outlooks, of how they made cheese and why they had two pigs, of her mother and father and cheeky village boys, of teachers who could read the paper and corrupt priests who gambled.

It was a world far removed from the one I was used to. I always wanted to hear more, but when the car lights came into the garage it was all over. I would be climbing back into my bunk as I heard Mum and Dad greet Janine.

I can't remember ever having to try to fall asleep after playing Flower with Janine.

## TWO

I was born in 1921, on a farm in Poland close to the German border. I can't remember anything about the farm, the country or the people because by the time I was one year old our family had moved to the other side of the country, the eastern side which was close to the Ukrainian border.

It was a big move for the family as it was a different world for us all. The area we moved to had seen much political unrest. The last major conflict had been the First World War, which left the countryside desolate and under Polish occupation, but, despite its ravages, there were still many Ukrainian people living there. So many, in fact, that the principal language in that region was Ukrainian. My mother found it difficult to buy things at the marketplace and complained to my father, 'Why did we come here? I can't understand anyone.'

We had moved there because good land was reputed to be available, and good available land was very important. It offered a chance for a better life. My father took that chance, bought the land and moved his family.

There were other Polish people in the region, but we were

considered a little unusual because my father had bought the land outright. Most of the Polish people working the land were soldiers who had been offered land as a government grant after the First World War. We were different. My father had taken a number of chances in his life and they had so far all paid off. He was honest, hardworking and had a lot of insight. His original plan was to leave Poland and take his family with him. He knew there would be trouble in Poland some day. Yes, he wanted to take us all far away. He wanted to move us to the other side of the world but he wasn't able to. Moving to the other side of the country was his reserve plan.

Unfortunately the land he bought was not much better than the land he had owned previously, however there was a lot more of it. When I think about it, it could not have been easy for him. He and his brother went first and built the foundations for our home on their own, then chopped down a few trees to build the house. Once it was finished the whole family came across, by which time he had begun work on the farm. In today's world farmers have trucks and superphosphate, but back then they didn't have such help.

Our farm was very different from the specialised farms we now have in Australia. Instead of one or two crops, we grew everything: wheat, rye, barley, potatoes, sweet corn, cucumbers, beetroot, turnips, sugar beet, beans and hemp. We had cows, horses, pigs, chickens, ducks and rabbits. The rabbits were bred for meat as there wasn't a lot of meat available and, come to think of it, there wasn't much meat on the rabbits either. However, what was there was very good. We made rabbit pie and a soup that was really quite nice.

Of course we ate the pigs as well. There were two types of pig,

One was allowed to grow to about seventy kilograms and was then sold at the market for bacon. The other pig we kept for ourselves. This pig had a good time eating. We fed it lots of good food to make it fat — the fatter the better. When the pig was slaughtered the fat was sometimes ten centimetres thick, which we thought was great. People have a different attitude to fat nowadays. As there was no fridge we had to prepare this fat to last the whole year. We did this by taking the stomach out of the pig and cleaning it thoroughly. The fat was then removed from the pig and cut into strips. The stomach was salted and then packed with the strips of fat. Once it was packed tight, it was sewn up. The salt preserved the fat. It got a little yellow, but it was good and was used for the whole winter. We put it in soup, spread it on bread and used it for cooking cabbage or potatoes or just about anything.

That was the pig fat. It was only one of the many things we did throughout the year. We became like the other farms in the area, self-sufficient. We made our own cheese from our own milk, flour from our own wheat, sauerkraut from our own cabbage, borscht from our own beetroot and cloth from our own hemp. The only things we bought from the shops were salt, sugar, yeast and matches. Luxury items were tea and coffee and sometimes, if we were lucky, plain dark chocolate.

For us children, apart from school most of our time was spent working on the farm. Harvest time was the busiest. Harvesting potatoes was particularly hard on our backs. Our father used a hand plough and we children followed behind, picking up the potatoes. This process would often last for days and days. That was hard, but it was nothing like harvesting the wheat and barley. Some farmers used a scythe but we had sickles for this task, cutting the wheat or barley close to the ground. We had to bend

right down to our toes, cutting for six or seven hours a day. You get tired doing that.

Harvest days started early, allowing us to come back to the house for lunch and to feed the pigs, chickens, cows, horses, rabbits and geese. This was followed by a two-hour rest before we went back to the harvest. After being cut, the crops were tied up into bundles and put out to dry. Once they were dry we took them to the barn for storage and threshing. At the end of a long day, when we came back to the house, we had to clean everything, feed the animals again, have dinner and then finally we could sleep. There was no time for stories during the harvest season.

In the winter it was different. During this season we sat by the warm stove at night and my mother and father would tell us all about life when they were young. They taught us many things, often in the dark as kerosene was very expensive and difficult to carry home from town. I remember my father talking to us about what we would do in the future. He said that of all the jobs in the world we must never become a private domestic in some rich person's home. He thought this would trap us and told us never to apply for a job such as this.

Sometimes in the evening five or six people would come over. The adults would play cards and tell their different stories. These were Polish men who had worked in America, Canada, Mexico and France. They had been all over the world to find work to bring some money back to Poland to build houses. I would curl up close to the stove and listen to them. Sometimes they spoke English to one another and we were amazed. It was very interesting for us. My father said, 'We should teach you a few words.'

'Art,' we all said, 'we will never use English.'  
But the men mainly told their stories. Oh what stories.

## *Animals*

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One evening Janine and I were playing Flower. I had picked up gladioli and freesia and for some reason Africa was in my mind.

'Have you been to Africa Janine?' I wondered aloud.

She drew in a short, sharp breath, raised her eyebrows and gave a little nod, all at the same time.

I gave a start. 'Have you really?' It was not the reply I was expecting at all.

'Yes, I was in Africa for seven years.' Her grey eyes went distant and serious.

'Did you see a lion?'

'Some said they saw a lion but I did not see lions.'

I was a little crestfallen but the excitement of a young fanatic remained. I dreamed of going to Africa some day, and here was someone who had been there and it was Janine, of all people! I considered she must have seen everything in seven years, except for lions. I asked if she had seen a leopard, a cheetah, and ran through a whole list of carnivores.

It was soon established that Janine had not seen any carnivores in Africa.

'No Tim, what we saw was a lot of these antelope and zebra and one elephant with huge ears, you would not believe, but Tim,' she said firmly, seeing that I wanted to ask about the elephant, 'I did not see very much of these animals because we

had to remain in camp for most of this time and these animals were out in bush. It was only while on the train, when they took us from Lusaka, that we saw them.'

I was excited and disappointed: excited that I knew someone who had been to Africa and who had seen an elephant in the wild, but disappointed that she had seen so little wildlife.

It was typical of Janine to just give me the honest facts, unexaggerated, unadorned and unembellished. It later occurred to me that many adults would have stretched the story when retelling it to an enthusiastic child, but Janine never did. The result was that instead of patronising my interest, she left an unwitting Hansel and Gretel trail that aroused my curiosity.

I went to bed thinking Janine was full of the most extraordinary surprises, and I couldn't stop wondering about her penetrating truthfulness. It did not occur to me to wonder how she ever got to Africa from Poland, or what she was doing there in the first place.