

LENA WASBUTZKY BERKMAN

EAST LIVERPOOL HIGH SCHOOL, CLASS OF 1911 | 1893-1976

“Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth.”

Research, HVR, and story by T.P. Calhoun | Revised August 13, 2026



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I first found Lena Wasbutzky almost by accident. I was browsing through the 1911 East Liverpool newspaper for another project when I hit the front page of the Evening Review for Thursday, May 25. The newspaper had surrounded the entire page with little portraits of the graduating class of East Liverpool High School.

I was struck by the celebratory aspects of it all in the civic sense and I immediately wanted to find out more about some of those kids. They would have been “big kids” in ELO when my grandparents on the river were “little kids”.

Our own high-school portraits in 1965 had been colorized after the fact, so the idea of reconstructing and colorizing the 1911 portraits did not seem strange to me at all. I grabbed three faces from the upper right of the page to experiment with. Lena was one of them.

The newspaper image was terrible to work with. Then I found the online 1911 Keramos yearbook and there she was again—much clearer this time, a young woman looking slightly off to the side with confidence. And underneath her portrait her classmates had left us their judgment of her:

Once you find a line like that, you have to dig deeper.

West Seventh Street

Lena was born in East Liverpool on November 8, 1893, the daughter of Charles Wasbutzky and Freda Solomon Wasbutzky. The Wasbutzkys were part of East Liverpool's small but increasingly established Jewish community. Charles was involved in the early organization of Congregation B'nai Jacob. The family lived on West Seventh Street, and Lena grew up surrounded by siblings whose names keep appearing as you work through the newspapers and directories.

That family background matters. East Liverpool was a pottery town, certainly, but it was never only a pottery town. Families were building stores, congregations, clubs, schools and institutions right alongside the kilns and potteries. And Lena was already distinguishing herself before she ever left high school.

ONE OF ONLY FORTY-NINE!

This is something Charles Brookes's story made me realize more clearly. East Liverpool had roughly 20,000 people in 1911—and the high-school graduating class had only forty-nine students.

That initially struck me as impossible. Then the obvious finally occurred to me: what they called high school in 1911 was not what we mean by universal secondary education today. A great many East Liverpool teenagers were already working full time. Staying in school through graduation was selective.

These were an unusual forty-nine kids, even just to still be in school and graduate, and Lena was very near the top of them. She and Homer Kapp were the honor students of the Class of 1911. Kapp finished four years with an average of "97 and a fraction," and the newspaper reported that Lena was a close second. So that extravagant-sounding Keramos line underneath her photograph was not

entirely extravagant. They knew who she was.

She Starts Becoming a Person

One of my favorite things about this kind of research is finding something that has almost nothing to do with the official accomplishments. Lena turns up in the Society pages at a friend's birthday party. There were games. There was an impromptu musical program. Three young women played piano solos. One was Lena. I love finding things like that. Now she isn't merely the academically brilliant girl in the yearbook. She plays piano. She has friends. She goes to parties.

College - and Home Again

And then she goes off to college. By 1914 the newspaper was reporting that Lena was home for the summer from Western Reserve University in Cleveland. She completed college—something the 1940 census would still record decades later as four years of college—and then did something I particularly like.

She returned to the Valley. Lena returned to the East Liverpool school system and taught algebra and English to another generation of kids coming through the schools she had just left herself. During World War I she also appears doing volunteer work, helping compile the card-index system used by the local home-service organization.

And there is another thread here that we can see more clearly now. Lena was involved in Jewish religious education in East Liverpool as well. Education, community and Jewish institutional life were already parts of her world before she ever became Lena Berkman. Then Lena married Meyer B. Berkman of Beaver Falls. The wedding took place February 3, 1921, in the Wasbutzky home on Seventh Street. And because newspapers once considered these things important enough to record, we

know what Lena wore. She had a traveling suit of blue poiret twill, a gray blouse and matching gray accessories, and carried white roses and orchids. The house was decorated with palms, ferns and white roses. Yellow and white were the colors for the wedding dinner. Afterward Lena and Meyer honeymooned through Atlantic City, New York and Bermuda.

February 3, 1921

Then she moved a short distance upriver to Beaver Falls.

At first I treated that almost as the point where Lena disappeared from the East Liverpool story. I don't think that anymore.

Another River Town, Another Jewish Community. Lena hadn't really left her world. She had moved to another industrial town in the same Upper Ohio Valley network. And Meyer was an interesting match.

Another River Town

He had been born in Beaver Falls in 1892, above his father's Seventh Avenue store. His father had established the family clothing business there in 1892. Meyer graduated from Beaver Falls High School in 1910—and, rather wonderfully, had been president of his class.

He originally intended to study law. Then came World War I. Meyer served with the Third Engineer Corps and was preparing to go overseas when the Armistice intervened. Afterward he returned to Beaver Falls and eventually became the man running Berkman's clothing business.

Lena had married into a very visible Beaver Falls merchant family. And this was not some anonymous little clothing shop. Berkman's became enough of a Beaver Falls institution that its advertising could proclaim it. The store marketed directly to Beaver Falls

students and made a point of Meyer's own status as a local high-school alumnus.

Meyer was also involved in Jewish religious education. We have him identified as one of the teachers associated with the Beaver Valley Hebrew Religious School. So Lena and Meyer had something besides family and retail business tying their lives together. Both had histories of involvement in Jewish education and community life.

The censuses let us peek through the window every ten years. In 1930 Lena and Meyer were living at 1113 Ninth Avenue in Beaver Falls. Their daughters Barbara and Marian were seven and three. The census called Lena a homemaker. Ten years later they were still at 1113 Ninth. Barbara was seventeen. Marian was thirteen.

1113 Ninth Avenue

We knew Lena eventually worked with Meyer in Berkman's. The 1967 ELHS reunion account remembered both her years teaching school and her later work in the family clothing business. Lena had built a community life in Beaver Falls. She belonged to Agudath Achim and Beth'el Congregation, the Outlook Club, and the National Council of Jewish Women. Her obituary also associates her with Beaver County mental-health work. The same pattern we saw when she was young keeps reappearing: education, organizations, Jewish community life and public usefulness.

A Community Life of Her Own

I don't yet know exactly what she did inside each of those organizations. I would rather leave that blank than invent committee chairmanships and offices for her. But the affiliations themselves tell us that Lena remained engaged in the civic life around her.

In 1967, the East Liverpool High School Class of 1911 held a reunion: Fifty-six years. They brought old newspapers, books and other mementos and talked about what had become of the kids whose faces had once surrounded that Evening Review front page. Lena was still living in Beaver Falls. Her classmates remembered that she had taught school for several years and then worked with Meyer in the clothing business. The people remembering Lena were the same people who, as teenagers, had put beneath her yearbook photograph: “Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth.”

Fifty-Six Years Later

Meyer died in December 1975. Lena followed him less than a year later, dying October 6, 1976, at the Beaver Falls unit of the Medical Center. She was eighty-two.

The Last Years

Her obituary still reached backward to East Liverpool. It identified her as a former teacher in the East Liverpool School District and as the daughter of Charles and Freda Solomon Wasbutzky. It also recorded the life she had built afterward in Beaver Falls—the congregations and organizations, her two daughters, Barbara Sherman and Marion Lipson, and three granddaughters. Her brother Lemuel and sisters Carrie Nevins and Eva Wasbutzky were still part of the family circle.

There is something satisfying about that. Those Wasbutzky names are everywhere when we look at East Liverpool in the early twentieth century, and some of them are still standing around Lena at the end.

When Lena died, the family asked that memorial contributions be made to the Lena W. Berkman AAUW Scholarship Fund. And at the end of her life there

was a scholarship carrying her name. Sixty-five years earlier, some teenager working on the Keramos yearbook had looked at Lena Wasbutzky's photograph and written:

A Scholarship Carrying Her Name

“Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth.” Turns out they were right.