

Some Stories About Mollie Orshansky

by

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I did not work in the Social Security Administration with Mollie Orshansky. However, I did get to know her beginning in the 1970s; we saw each other at meetings and other events, and often talked by telephone about poverty and related issues. Accordingly, most of the stories about her that I know are stories that she told me, rather than happenings that I observed myself. I have also included some stories that she told to other people (people who interviewed her at various times), as well as a few things from her writings and Congressional testimony.

Mollie Orshansky was born on January 9, 1915, in the South Bronx in New York City. She was one of seven daughters (one of whom died in early childhood) of Samuel and Fannie Orshansky, Ukrainian Jewish immigrants who spoke only limited English.¹

Mollie's father worked at different times as a tinsmith, an ironworker, a plumber, a repairman, and a small grocery owner.² Although he worked hard, Mollie and her sisters grew up poor--in her words, the family could "barely...make ends meet."³ The girls slept two to a bed, and wore hand-me-down clothing.⁴

Mollie remembered going with her mother to stand in relief lines to get surplus food. As she grew up, she became quite familiar with the experience of having to forgo one small purchase in order to have the money for something else.⁵ She later summed up this aspect of her early life by saying, "If I write about the poor, I don't need a good imagination--I have a good memory."⁶

Mollie was one of the very few young women in her neighborhood to attend high school, rather than going to work.⁷ She was the first child in her family to graduate from high school, and the first to graduate from college.⁸ She graduated from Hunter College in 1935⁹, in the middle of the Depression, but she soon found a job--a permanent job as a statistical clerk in the New York Department of Health's Bureau of Nursing, doing work on infant mortality. Decades later, an interviewer asked her if she had always had the goal of doing something for children or something against poverty. Mollie responded that she had never thought about what she wanted to be; at that time one didn't plan to be something, one planned to get a job.¹⁰

In 1936, the U.S. Children's Bureau offered Mollie a three-month temporary appointment as a junior statistical clerk at \$1,440 per year. Although it was a temporary appointment, it paid more than she was earning at the New York Department of Health, so she took it. The Children's Bureau renewed her temporary three-month appointment several times, but it was finally made permanent.¹¹

To take the Children's Bureau job, Mollie had to move from New York City to Washington; when she first came to Washington, she limited herself to one dollar a day for food.¹²

In 1963, Mollie was working on an in-house research project on "Poverty as it Affects Children" at the Social Security Administration (SSA). Since there was no widely accepted quantitative definition of poverty at the time, she developed an initial version of her poverty thresholds, for families with children only. (She was not intending to develop a new national measure of poverty; indeed, no one knew that within a year, a national war on poverty was going to be declared.) In July 1963, she published a *Social Security Bulletin* article, "Children of the Poor," presenting results of her research project. Much of her analysis of the economic status of families with children was based on a special tabulation of data from the March 1962 Current Population Survey which SSA purchased from the Census Bureau.¹³ There was one story about this phase of her development of the thresholds that she told to several interviewers: The amount that SSA paid to the Census Bureau for the tabulation was \$2,500. The results showed that the median annual income of nonfarm female-headed families with one or more children was \$2,340. Mollie was horrified when she realized that half of these families had to live for an entire year on less money than SSA had paid for one statistical tabulation.¹⁴ She burst into her supervisor's office, interrupting a meeting to tell them of this shocking finding. One of the women attending the meeting urged her not to get so excited, pointing out that even if Mollie hadn't used the SSA's money for her tables, none of it would have gone to the poor women she was studying.¹⁵ In light of this finding, she later commented, "I determined I was going to get my \$2,500 worth."¹⁶

Another story about her development of the poverty thresholds was one that Mollie seems to have told less frequently. As is widely known, she based her thresholds on the Agriculture Department's economy food plan. She had become familiar with the food plans when she worked at the Agriculture Department¹⁷; indeed, she had been working with the food plans as early as 1948.¹⁸ In the context of developing poverty thresholds for families, she became concerned about the fact that the economy food plan did not allow for any purchases of food away from home, either at work or at school. For the purpose of developing poverty thresholds, she wanted to modify the cost of the food plan by adding 15 cents a day per person to it, to allow for the husband in a family to buy coffee at work, or for the children to buy snacks. However, her supervisor would not allow her to do so.¹⁹

Yet another little story about Mollie's development of the thresholds should be of particular interest to people who use Current Population Survey (CPS) data to tabulate how many

Americans are below either official or alternative poverty lines. When Mollie was developing the thresholds, a CPS sample of roughly 25 thousand households was used to produce income (and then poverty) data for a national total of roughly 47 million families and 11 million unrelated individuals.²⁰ In published Census Bureau reports, one always sees figures that relate to the national totals of families and unrelated individuals. However, when Mollie got the results of her \$2,500 tabulation back from the Census Bureau in 1963, they only gave her the unweighted counts of sample households in various poverty and non-poverty categories; SSA's payment to the Bureau had not been enough for them to provide weighted national totals for her. She had to do the work herself--"by hand," she once said--to calculate weighted national totals from the unweighted sample count.²¹ She also calculated the poverty gap "by hand" for her January 1965 article--she didn't even use a calculator.²²

Mollie once met Jenny Podoluk--the Canadian civil servant who developed Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-Offs during the 1960s. They met while Mollie was attending a meeting in Montreal at which she was a discussant. Jenny Podoluk was in the audience. (Unfortunately Mollie didn't tell me what they talked about.) Mollie was the only woman among the presenters and discussants at this meeting.²³

Mollie had a wry sense of humor. From time to time she would come up with comments that were quite funny, and in a few cases were also insightful comments (or even epigrams) about social conditions. I have included a few examples of her humor below.

- o The first time Mollie testified before a Congressional committee, in 1969, she began her statement by saying, "I read the Bible with new interest these days because I now know that the injunction 'The poor you always have with you' means me personally. My assignment for the last few years has been to define poverty and near poverty for the Social Security Administration."²⁴
- o In 1984, Mollie appeared before a hearing about measuring poverty that was held by two Congressional subcommittees. The presiding Congressperson told her, "we thank you for making yourself available." Mollie responded, "Thank you. I'm not sure I can thank you for making me make myself available."²⁵
- o In November 1973, a subcommittee of the House of Representatives' Committee on Education and Labor held a hearing on ways of determining family eligibility for higher education student financial assistance. The witnesses included Mollie, who testified about the poverty thresholds, and Eva Jacobs of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), who testified about BLS' family budgets. After they had testified, Representative John Dellenback [R-Oregon], a member of the subcommittee, commented, "I was particularly

impressed to see that when we called for experts today to come to testify before us, two different divisions of the Government, in sending their best people, I assume, sent women instead of men to testify before us.”²⁶ Mollie later commented privately to Eva Jacobs, “Poppa decides how much they spend, and Momma decides on how to spread it around.”²⁷

- o A comment that Mollie repeatedly made (a colleague referred to it in 1969 as “her classic statement”) was, “Women have two chances to be poor. They can marry into poverty or they can make it on their own.”²⁸

Endnotes

1. Sewell Chan, "Alum Profile: Mollie Orshansky, June '31," *Alumnotes* [newsletter of the Hunter College High School Alumnae/i Association], Vol. 32, No. 3, Summer 2006, p. 4; John Cassidy, "Relatively Deprived: How poor is poor?," *The New Yorker*, April 3, 2006, p. 42 <http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/04/03/060403fa_fact>.
2. William J. Eaton, "The Poverty Line," *New York Post*, April 4, 1970, p. 24; Cassidy, p. 42.
3. [no author given], "How Much Is Too Little?" [article about Orshansky], *Oasis* [publication for the employees and retired personnel of the Social Security Administration], Vol. 17, No. 10, October 1971, pp. 15-16; Ira J. Hadnot, "The politics of poverty," *Dallas Morning News*, November 28, 1999.
4. Cassidy, p. 42.
5. Mollie Orshansky, personal communication, October 1, 1998.
6. Eaton, p. 24.
7. Deborah A. Stone, "Making the Poor Count," *The American Prospect*, No. 17, Spring 1994, p. 87 <http://tapdev.browsermedia.com/cs/articles?article=making_the_poor_count>.
8. Orshansky, personal communication, January 6, 1999.
9. Chan, p. 4.
10. Stone, p. 87.
11. Orshansky, personal communications, summer 1987 and August 17, 1993; Eaton, p. 24; Hadnot.
12. Orshansky, personal communication, November 8, 1994.
13. Gordon M. Fisher, "The Development of the Orshansky Poverty Thresholds and Their Subsequent History as the Official U.S. Poverty Measure" [unpublished paper], May 1992--partially revised September 1997 <<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/povmeas/papers/orshansky.html>>.
14. Eaton, p. 24; Robert D. Hershey, Jr., "Q.&A.: Mollie Orshansky--The Hand That Shaped America's Poverty Line As the Realistic Index," *New York Times*, August 4, 1989, p. A11; Stone, pp. 85, 87; Mollie Orshansky, "Children of the Poor," *Social Security Bulletin*, Vol. 26, No. 7, July 1963, p. 7.
15. Stone, p. 87.

16. Eaton, p. 24.
17. Eaton, p. 24.
18. Vincent Burke, "How to Meet Living Cost Stumps Even Uncle Sam's Budget Experts," *Harrisburg, Illinois, Daily Register*, February 20, 1948, p. 4.
19. Orshansky, personal communication, April 15, 1993. This incident seems to be indirectly reflected in a reference in her January 1965 article to "food extras, such as milk at school for the children, or the coffee [the homemaker's] husband might buy to supplement the lunch he carries to work..." (Mollie Orshansky, "Counting the Poor: Another Look at the Poverty Profile," *Social Security Bulletin*, Vol. 28, No. 1, January 1965, p. 10). Note also Mollie's comment in her July 1963 article that the food plans include "no additional allowance for snacks or the higher cost of meals away from home or meals served to guests. Nor is there extra allowance for the ice-cream vendor or the soda pop so often a part of our children's daily diet" (Orshansky 1963, p. 8).
20. See figures on pp. 3 and 19 of U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, No. 43, *Income of Families and Persons in the United States: 1963*, Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, September 29, 1964.
21. Orshansky, personal communications, December 8, 1993, and March 4, 1994.
22. Orshansky, personal communications, June 5, 1992, and December 8, 1993.
23. Orshansky, personal communication, June 5, 1992.
24. Mollie Orshansky, "Statement..." (April 30), p. 136 in U.S. Senate, Special Committee on Aging, *Economics of Aging: Toward a Full Share in Abundance: Hearings Before the Special Committee on Aging--Part 1--Survey Hearing*, 91st Congress, 1st session, April 29-30, 1969.
25. Rep. Charles Rangel [D-New York] and Mollie Orshansky, p. 6 in U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Post Office and Civil Service and Committee on Ways and Means, *Census and Designation of Poverty and Income: Joint Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Census and Population of the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service and the Subcommittee on Oversight of the Committee on Ways and Means* (Post Office and Civil Service Committee Serial No. 98-28, Ways and Means Committee Serial No. 98-87), 98th Congress, 2nd session, May 15, 1984.
26. Rep. John Dellenback, p. 75 in U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Education and Labor, *Student Financial Assistance (Theory and Practice of Need Analysis): Hearings Before the Special Subcommittee on Education of the Committee on Education and Labor--Part 1: Theory and Practice of Need Analysis*, 93rd Congress, 1st session, October 15 and November 15, 1973. Immediately after this comment, Rep. Dellenback added, "It is also rather interesting, Ms. Orshansky, to meet a household word. We have found the Orshansky formula [to be] the focus of so much of our discussion as we wrestled with ESEA [the Elementary and Secondary

Education Act] that I didn't know whether this name was a figment of somebody's imagination, or a collection of letters that had been put together somehow to name a bureau. But I am glad to see it is a very real flesh and blood person."

27. Orshansky, personal communication, June 5, 1992.

28. Dorothy McCamman, p. 139 in U.S. Senate, Special Committee on Aging, *Economics of Aging: Toward a Full Share in Abundance: Hearings Before the Special Committee on Aging--Part I--Survey Hearing*, 91st Congress, 1st session, April 29-30, 1969; Mollie Orshansky and Judith S. Bretz, "Born To Be Poor: Birthplace and Number of Brothers and Sisters As Factors in Adult Poverty," *Social Security Bulletin*, Vol. 39, No. 1, January 1976, p. 27.