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## THE MELZER FAMILY by Julie Sandler-Friedman

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### FRANKENTHAL: MENDEL AND MARIE

You trace the history of Mendel and Maria Melzer, of Gwozdziec, Poland. Mendel was the child of Yetta (Ida/Etta) Selzer and Hersh Koppel (Kapel) Melzer. He had six brothers and sisters. Maria (Marie) was the daughter of Leib (Label/Leo/Aryeh) Breindel and Tzipporah (Cypojra) Geffner. Marie had eight brothers and sisters.

They were both forward-looking people who, while continuing to lead a life fully in the Jewish tradition and culture, wished to move out beyond the confines of the *shtetl*. They wore modern dress, and were interested in what the whole world had to offer.

You found a record of the family in *Worms am Rhein*. My Uncle Leo said they traveled there because they had family in Worms and Mainz, and there, said our mother, a cousin “gave Mendel a chance.” This was a theme in the life of the Melzers, as in many families: you went where there was family, and family would help you to forge a path. And then you, in your turn, would help others.

It is no surprise that the Melzers chose the Middle Rhine. As you know well, Paul, it was a remarkable area, with Jewish communities dating back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. I found these links about Worms, Mainz and Speyer on the World Heritage and UNESCO websites:

<http://www.worldheritagesite.org/sites/twhs.php?id=5975s>

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5975/s>

The young couple went to the town of Frankenthal in 1913. They settled there and had four children: the fraternal twins Franziska and Rosa, Sophia Gusti, and Leo. Their wish was to make a better life for their children, and to educate them in and for the modern world.

Franziska, our mother, told us that their parents were both keenly intelligent people. Mendel was an autodidact, having had to leave school after only the fourth grade to begin to work. He studied both secular and Jewish subjects. He was gifted in mathematics. He and Marie always kept up with new developments in the world, said Franziska, and always remained informed, reading newspapers intently.

My Uncle Leo said, “everyone came through my parents’ house in Frankenthal, on the way to Palestine, to America, and my parents did what they could for all of them—gave them furniture, gave them money, they were happy to do it—it was family.” Some stayed a short time, some for a long time.

You tell us, Paul, that you discovered a record of Marie’s brother Abraham Aron and his wife (you found that her name was Ella Kaiser) living with Marie and Mendel in Frankenthal.

Marie's brother Jacob, who had served in the Polish army, also settled in Germany, and remained very connected to Marie and her family throughout their lives.

Sometimes, the Melzers traveled to visit relatives in Gwozdziec. They would take a train to the nearest big city, where their family would pick them up in a horse and buggy. Our mother remembered visiting family in Worms, as well. Still other times, she told my brother, David, they visited cousins in Romania. The last leg of *that* journey was by oxcart.

Starting in the 1920's, Marie Melzer's sisters Henia, Golda, and Hannah, the youngest sibling, all eventually left Gwozdziec. They went to Palestine—Hannah after a stay with the Melzers in Frankenthal—where they settled and had families. There are now vibrant, strong branches of the family tree—many generations of the Breindel family of Gwozdziec—in Israel, and in several European countries.

You are correct, Paul, that Mendel Melzer had a brother, Adolph Melzer. You found that he came to Frankenthal in 1920. He had been conscripted into the Polish army in World War I, was captured, and weathered a long stay in a prisoner-of-war camp. There, Uncle Adolph told us, endless games of chess helped to pass the weary hours. After the war, he ultimately decided to leave Poland. And so, he went to Frankenthal, en route to America. Uncle Adolph traveled to New York City, married Minnie Werthamer, and had three children.

Slowly, patiently, the Melzers built a prosperous family business, and a life for their four children. This Mendel and Marie did together; Marie worked full-time in the business, and was unequivocally an equal partner in all senses of that phrase, something unusual in that time and place.

Their world revolved around work, family, and friends. Large parts of the fabric of family life were the weekly rhythms and rituals of *Shabbos* and the synagogue, and the cycle of all the Jewish holidays of the year, each in its season and with its own particular colors and customs.

Marie and Mendel sent their children to a camp for Jewish children in the Black Forest for several summers, to enjoy nature and learn Hebrew.

Sometimes, all the children chafed during the lengthy synagogue services. My mother told me that once, when she was a child, she had been sternly ordered out of synagogue on the High Holidays, when she was swinging a charm on her charm bracelet in wide arcs and making all the other girls around her shake in silent laughter, which kept erupting into giggles.

All four Melzer children were very different. Rosa (Rosel) was quiet and kind. Franziska, called Popa (*Puppe*, Dolly) or Franzel by her family and friends, was outgoing and effervescent, and could walk on stilts and juggle several balls with ease. The twins Rosel and Popa were healthy and hardy, and shared a love of physical activity. Sophia (Sophel) was indrawn and studious. Leo was...“well,” says Uncle Leo facetiously, “I was a young boy.”

Popa remembers how on the morning of a birthday, the children would wake to find a table of wrapped gifts for the birthday child—or the birthday twins—giving promise of the special quality of the day to come.

Both my mother and my Uncle Leo remembered the address of their home in Frankenthal, *Ludwigstrasse 7*. Franziska, who learned to play the piano skillfully and sang well, told us that she was called “the nightingale of *Ludwigstrasse*.”

My brother David reminds me of a story our mother told often, of her being in front of the *Konditorei* in Frankenthal as a young child, squinting at the pastries through the window, when a family friend, a doctor, came up behind her and placed his own spectacles on her nose. Suddenly, all the cakes appeared in dazzling, crystal clarity; young Franziska needed glasses!

Mendel and Marie earned great respect and trust as honest business people in Frankenthal. My Uncle Leo did not know until we read your letter, Paul, that his parents had taken over *two* furniture businesses, first that of E. Scheiering, and later, that of Karl Verberne—truly a feat of hard work. Leo did recall hearing the name *Wormserstrasse-Wormser Street*.

The Melzers had a large, well-run home, which allowed them to continue generously hosting many family members. They were able to provide very well for their children, and wished to open many doors of study and culture for them. They were full of plans, energy, and optimism.

Then, things began to change, first slowly, then drastically. The Nazis were rising to power in a Germany where millions of people were unemployed. By 1931, Hitler and the Nazi Party already dominated the Reichstag. Anti-Semitism, which had always been present, if more dormant, was now increasingly virulent.

My grandmother never shared with any of us what it must have been like for them when the attempts to ruin their business began in 1931, though the formal boycott of Jewish businesses did not begin until 1933. Paul, she had never told any of us, not even Leo or Fran, of the *Frankenthaler Zeitung* notice you found about the slander:

*FZ (Frankenthaler Zeitung) No. 261, Saturday, November 7, 1931*

**Evil Defamation**

**The slanderous rumor is being spread from somewhere that I was apprehended crossing a border, trying to smuggle a large sum of money into a foreign country. There is not a word of truth to this claim, which the local Criminal Investigation Department will readily confirm upon request.**

**I am hereby warning everybody against spreading these untrue claims further. I will give:**

**100 Marks Reward**

**to the one who reveals the originator of this rumor to me.**

**M. Melzer, Frankenthal  
Owner of the C. Verbene Firm**

Leo said that placing this notice is just what his father would have done in the face of such an outrage: Mendel would have said, publicly, “No, this is a lie!” He did so even though it increased his visibility, and was therefore a very dangerous thing to do, said Leo, “because that was the truth, and that is what they tried to live by.”

In fact, Paul, after Leo read all the facts collected in your letter, and all the notices in the *Frankenthaler Zeitung*, he said that his parents “didn’t change at all, really: they had the same way of working and living in Germany that I saw later, when I was older, in America.”

Of course, it was becoming clear that the family would not be able to continue with their way of life. Things had been worsening steadily, and on January 30, 1933, they reached their crisis. That very night, Mendel Melzer was picked up:

“The night that Hitler took over,” Leo said, “some of the thugs in Frankenthal came to our house and took my father, and put him in jail. My mother spent all night going from the mayor, to everybody that she knew, to see if she could somehow obtain his release. Because my parents knew everybody in Frankenthal, and had a good reputation, she could do this. And the next morning, he *was* released. That’s exactly what happened.”

I pictured my grandmother, frantic and thinking not at all of her own safety, running from office to office, home to home throughout that long, terrifying night. In the morning, with Mendel’s release, came the clear and definite realization that they would need to leave small Frankenthal as quickly as possible, to live in the relative anonymity of a larger city, and from there to make a plan and arrangements to eventually leave the country.

One of the notices you found in the *Frankenthaler Zeitung*, Paul, was the sad obituary notification of the death of Marie’s brother, Abraham Aron Breindel, at only 43 years of age, on March 3, 1933. What a difficult time it must have been for the family: being in deep grief over Abraham’s early death, while frantically readying to leave Frankenthal for Mannheim after Mendel’s frightening arrest.

## MANNHEIM AND PALESTINE

The Melzers moved to Mannheim in 1933, and established a furniture store in *Ludwigshafen am Rhein*. Leo remembers the address that you give on Lamey Street, Paul: *Lameystrasse 9*. We still have one of M. Melzer’s business cards announcing a change of address and telephone number.

In Mannheim, the Melzers did the slow, nerve-wracking work of figuring out, as the situation worsened, where to go next. There were more and more anti-Semitic incidents in the city:

“My father used to like to have beer with dinner,” said Leo. “So, when I was little, I was sent down half a block, where there was a *Bierstube*, and where every night I picked up his beer, until the time came that, when I got there—and I could just barely read yet—I read the words: *Juden Verboten*.”

Then, too, Leo said, “I was going to school. They had segregated the Jewish kids from the rest, and so one day they moved us to another room. Well, before we got there, somebody had grabbed a ladder in that room, and climbed up to the top to take Hitler’s picture down from high on the front wall.” To this day, Leo does not know whether it was because the picture was one that the school authorities felt the young Jews did not deserve to see, or if it was the brave and compassionate act of a teacher who felt it unnecessary to add insult to injury to the children in the segregated room.

When Marie and Mendel tried to go on a vacation to the resort town of Baden-Baden, Mendel was recognized as a Jew, and “they got ahold of my father and beat him up,” said Leo.

My mother remembers riding her bicycle through the street at night, seeing a German soldier, and willing herself to put a confident, happy smile on her face as she passed him, so that he would think her a carefree German Aryan girl....

My mother also told the story of Leo’s appendectomy. Leo himself remembers, at age five or so, beginning to suffer from very bad stomach pains, which did not lessen. He recalls that it was just before his parents were leaving on a scouting trip to Palestine. When his pains persisted, the family took him to the nearest hospital. They did this with misgivings, since by 1935 interactions with officials of any kind were, for Jews, fraught with unknowns and fear. It turned out that he had appendicitis, and the small boy was given an appendectomy. The family visited him daily, waiting for him to be released. They began to wonder why he was being kept for so long. One day, visiting him, Fran became increasingly alarmed at the refusal of the hospital staff to answer any of her questions about Leo, and also at the tones of contempt and indifference in which some of the staff spoke to her. As her anxiety and concern grew, she decided to take matters into her own hands. She carefully and silently lifted her brother onto her back, told him to clasp his hands around her neck, wrapped his small legs around her waist, and walked quietly down to the hospital lobby and out the front door. Then, she walked home with her little brother on her back.

Franziska, a gifted student with a talent for science, attended Gymnasium when the family moved to Mannheim. Most likely, Paul, she did attend Girls High School in *Ludwigshafen am Rhein*, as you assume in your letter. I remember her telling us that she attended a rigorous school, that prepared her well for University, which she was looking forward to attending as a medical student.

She always remembered the night before her high school graduation: her physics teacher called to tell the honor student that *she had better not come* to her own graduation—to tell her to stay home from the ceremony, for her own safety. He feared that neither he nor anyone would be able to offer protection if an action against the Jews erupted. It was a bitter day for Franzel.

Yet, apparently, she did receive her *Abitur*, and was somehow able to enroll at the University in Heidelberg in 1935.

Strangely, while German Jews were forbidden to attend the University, Polish Jews were not. Though Germany had accepted Jews into the country, they did not issue German passports to them. So, the whole Melzer family continued to hold Polish passports. Ironically, this fact allowed Franziska to attend the University.

The University of Heidelberg record you obtained in 2001, Paul, shows that she was matriculated as a medical student from April 4, 1935 to the end of the summer semester. However, as the situation worsened, Franziska slowly realized that her dream of becoming a medical doctor in Heidelberg was not to be. She was a member of the Socialist/Zionist group *Hashomer Hatzair*, and with that group, she instead began to prepare seriously for a very different kind of life, in another country.

Leo remembers that his three sisters were “smuggled out of Germany to Palestine with the Youth Aliyah.” The Youth Aliyah had come into being on January 30, 1933. Conceived of and founded by Recha Frierer the same day that Hitler took power, the organization saved the lives of thousands of Jewish children. Its archival records can be found here: <http://findingaids.cjh.org/?pID=803532#a2>

Sophie talked of going to Palestine with the Youth Aliyah. Franziska, too, used to say that *Sophie* went with the Youth Aliyah; she never talked to us about herself or Rosel being in the Youth Aliyah, only about her life in Jerusalem. In any event, it is not clear that the twins necessarily traveled with Sophie. They were already over eighteen years old, and considered adults. The circumstances are murky—there is no one who lived through it of whom Leo and I can ask the details. However, it is obvious that Sophie did not end up in the same place as either of her sisters in Palestine, no matter how they all arrived. Travel for the purpose of visiting would have been difficult and fraught; the roads were narrow, rugged, and sometimes dangerous. So, Sophie felt alone. In the midst of her youth group in the countryside, the shy girl felt frightened and abandoned.

The twins Rosel and Popa had a very different experience in Palestine. Five years older than Sophie, they put down roots in the new country. Rosel fell in love, meeting and marrying Rolf Lange. Popa worked in the *Beit ha-Tinokot* founding hospital in Jerusalem. Idealistic Popa found herself in the company of many like-minded, passionate young people. She made a circle of friends, and became engaged to a young man.

Marie and Mendel were in the process of convincing as many family members as they could of the necessity of leaving Germany. They sent Marie’s brother, Jacob, to the relative safety of Palestine. He remained there for a period of his life.

All they saw around them, and all that they read in the papers, left the Melzers with no doubt whatsoever of the urgency of leaving while it was still possible to do so. It must have taken a steely effort of will to steer through the rising tide of hysteria, fear, and turbulence to carry out a plan of departure. It is almost unbelievable now: Leo said that Mendel and Marie actually arranged and went on scouting trips to both Palestine and New York. so that they could make a definite plan of action, and move the family. They went to Palestine probably twice during those years, and to New York in February of 1936.

At first, they had opted to move the family swiftly to Palestine, but then, “there were pogroms there,” Leo said. Indeed, riots had been breaking out there as far back as 1921. Marie and Mendel would certainly have known about the Palestine Riot of 1933, and subsequent occurrences. In fact, beginning in April of 1936, there was a marked escalation in violence, and continuing bloodshed.

The Melzers made the decision that they must bring the girls back from Palestine, and go to America. By the end of 1936, they were finalizing their arrangements.

No foreigners entered the United States at that time without a sponsor. There were quotas.

The Melzers had deep doubts about large, forbidding New York City, so different from the relatively small Mannheim. It developed, though, that there was the possibility of going to a far-off place called Minnesota. Three uncles of Mendel's—Morris, Solomon, and Charles Selcer—had gone to America from Gwozdziec near the turn of the century, around 1900. They settled and had families in and around Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The American Consulate would not grant any visas unless an immigrant family had someone from America write to *guarantee with their own money that for the next five years, the new immigrants would not be a burden on America*. While many in the Selcer families had been very successful before the Great Depression, the Depression had hit hard. Most of the family members in Minneapolis found themselves regrettably unable to sponsor their Melzer cousins under such terms.

However, one of Solomon Selcer's daughters, Mendel's cousin Prudence (Prudie) had married Leopold (Paul) Pistner, who was a prosperous Minneapolis businessman. In December of 1936, Paul Pistner sent an affidavit supporting the Melzer family's application for passport visas. "He said he would take care of us," is how the young child Leo remembered it. Grateful and relieved, the family felt the enormity of what Paul Pistner had agreed to do for cousins of his wife, people he had never even met.

Leo still has a copy of that affidavit.

And so, the family got ready for the long and arduous journey, first to the port in Belgium, and then by boat across the ocean to New York. In September of 1936, "Sophie and Fran were smuggled back into Germany," is Leo's childhood memory of the event, "so that they could come to America with us."

Rosel stayed in Palestine with her husband. In 1938, she would give birth to a son there, Zvi Koppel Lange.

## AMERICA

When they fled Europe in 1937, the Melzers left behind the lion's share of their belongings, and most of their money. There was great uncertainty about how to carry the money that they would need on their journey, and great anxiety about border crossings. And yet...

Part of their journey was by train, to Paris. In a spirited act of *carpe diem* and defiance, Mendel and Marie, escaping from Germany, *took the family to the 1937 World's Fair*- the Paris Exposition. If they were going to be in Paris, they were not going to miss it! (Leo says ruefully that he, at age eight, did not get to go along—the family decided that one of the sisters would stay with him at the small hotel.)

They then continued on to the large seaport of Antwerp, Belgium. From there, leaving behind them the only life they knew, they crossed the Atlantic by ship, to the port of New York.

Touchingly, Mendel's Uncle Charlie Selcer and his wife Ida had traveled all the way from Minneapolis with their warm-hearted daughter Celia to meet the family at the boat. Later, Celia always reminded Leo that he had proudly told her he knew one English word: *Schokolade!*

Mendel's brother Adolph and his wife Minnie met the family at the boat in New York as well. The Melzers stayed with Adolph and Minnie Melcer and their three boys, Seymour (Shimon), and the twins Sheldon and Harvey, for several weeks. Ties were developed between members of the families that have lasted for generations. Harvey, particularly, became someone who facilitated continued family connections over many decades. Sheldon and his family made their home a gathering place for many holidays. Leo and Seymour, the same age, felt an affinity that became a lifelong friendship. The Melzers and the Melcers have always remained in close touch.\*

The Melzers knew how very fortunate they were to have had the funds and the wherewithal to leave, and to find sanctuary. Yet, underlying their relief was the specter of *why* they had had to leave their home. Their thankfulness co-existed with deep worry and anxiety about those still in Europe.

After their stay with the Melcer family in New York, the Melzers made the journey westward to the strange land of Minnesota. Because of their previous trips, both Palestine and New York had been at least a little bit known to Mendel and Marie; the world of the American Midwest was totally unknown.

Slowly, the Melzers started over again in this bewildering new place. Mendel was 50 years old, and Marie was nearly so. They struggled to "get on their feet" as my sister Claudia put it. They had to cope with everything being unfamiliar. Not only was the language different, *every single thing*, large and small, was different. The winter was frigidly cold, and the summer was humid and hot. The culture was markedly different. Social customs, behaviors, and manners were different. Clothing, foods, and the design of the buildings were all different. Even the rituals at synagogue were different. However, there was family in Minnesota. There was Mendel's Uncle Charlie. There were all the Selcer cousins. There were the Pistners. The immigrants began the process of making the city of Minneapolis their home.

Everyone buckled down to either work, or to school.

Sophie went to high school and Leo to grade school. Leo still remembers that for his first day of school, Fran dressed him carefully in the appropriate ensemble for a young schoolboy in Germany: *Lederhosen*. His Minneapolis classmates and teacher were quite surprised.

Kind, charismatic Celia Saks, Uncle Charlie's daughter, gave Fran a job in the elegant clothing store she owned with her husband Jimmy. Young Fran learned, among other things, to gift-wrap packages and curl ribbons with beautiful American paper of many colorful designs. Many years later, when Fran's six children would visit the store, there were always welcoming embraces, warm smiles, and chocolates.

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\* When Uncle Adolph emigrated to America, his clan became the Melcers, just as the Selzers became the Selcers. There is now a substantial family clan of Melcers in America.

All the family members had to learn the new language; only Sophie and Popa had already studied it in school. Leo swiftly learned the natural, accent-free English of very young immigrants. His schoolmates pronounced his name in the English way, “Lee-oh” not “*Lay-oh*” as the family called him. Sophel, now called by the more American name of Sophie, gradually became fluent, and soon had only the trace of an accent. Popa, now called Fran, eventually spoke excellent English, but she was already 22; her English always stayed charmingly, heavily accented. For Marie and Mendel, English remained a struggle. Marie, however, developed her own idiosyncratic and expressive form of the language, and could always make herself understood.

### A MINNESOTA BUSINESS

It was a very difficult time. Marie and Mendel Melzer were trying to figure out a new way to earn a living. They bent all their efforts and energies toward this, and scrimped and saved mightily. One of Leo’s most powerful memories is this quintessential story: there was a movie theatre just a few steps away from the family apartment. Tickets were one quarter each. One evening, Mendel and Marie went downstairs to go to the movies. A few minutes later, the children, puzzled, heard them return home. They had decided *not* to go to the movies, but to save the two quarters instead.

For Mendel and Marie Melzer, going to work meant starting a business. Trying to start *any* new business was rough going. Mendel and Marie tried three different ones: a wholesale clothing business, a soap manufacturing business, “and one other one,” said Leo. None of these three trials worked. So, Marie and Mendel decided to return to what they knew best for their next endeavor: the furniture business. “They began to go around the city to see furniture people,” Leo recalled. They were laughed at openly, he said. They were told again and again, “you’re old, and you don’t even speak English!”

Finally, one man did not laugh. His name was Harry Bernstein. When he talked to Mendel, he asked him to come back again the next day, and to bring his partner, Marie. After speaking to them both, he told them that he would be glad to hire them, but that “you two should not be working for other people.” Harry Bernstein had decided that he would help them get started in their own business again. And so, from this beginning, and with this sudden, unexpected backing—the whole story being a far more complicated and lengthy one than can be told here—Marie and Mendel started again, from square one.

Working steadily and hard, the couple opened their American furniture store, Cashway Furniture, at 322 East Hennepin Avenue, Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1940. Marie and Mendel spoke to their customers in an array of languages, some more fluent than others, yet all full of warm welcome: broken English, of course, as well as German, Yiddish, Polish, some Ukrainian, some Lithuanian, and some Russian. At first, Fran was the one who greeted customers in English, hers being the best, although heavily accented. Later, others dove in and spoke English more and more. Leo, age 11, was involved at the store from its very beginning.

Both Eastern European immigrants and American-born people found their way to the furniture store. Many of them remained customers for decades. The business was a fixture of its kind in Minneapolis until it closed in the year 2000.

The Melzers conducted business in the Minneapolis community in the same way that they had in Germany. Their notice to newlyweds in the *Frankenthaler Zeitung* in 1921, during their first year of business, could have served just as easily years later in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, since the Melzers' American store and its operation had a corresponding sense of simplicity and familiarity:

*FZ (Frankenthaler Zeitung) No. 225, Tuesday, September 27, 1921*

**Newlyweds won't find a better selection of kitchens, bedrooms, and individual furniture anywhere else than at**

**M. Melzer Furniture Store  
7 Ludwig Street, Frankenthal  
Telephone 433  
Free Delivery Out of Town as well**

The quote on their business card, "*Satisfied customers are our pride. Let us include you,*" Leo said, remained as emblematic of them in the new country as it had been in the old.

Slowly, and with vicissitudes, the family business began to flourish. In 1942, they moved it to a larger space, at 408 E. Hennepin Avenue, and had a grand opening. We still have a photograph of the invitation card. Later, the family would move the store again to an even larger space, at 310 East Hennepin Avenue, where it remained for the rest of the life of the business. These moves from place to place were very short physical distances, but in the life of the family, each move represented many hurdles and obstacles overcome; each was an enormous milestone. Over time, Leo said, marveling, "they built up the whole thing again."

## FRIENDS

The family made many friends in Minneapolis. One of the most important early ones was Martha Schoenberg Gelb, who had escaped from Vienna, and who had also arrived in Minneapolis because of the affidavit of relatives. She had met and married Emil Gelb shortly after her arrival. Thoughtful, intelligent and kind, she became a permanent family friend, and from their time of meeting, was a big part of the Melzer family's life in those early years. Fran considered her one of her closest friends to the end of her life. "She was like a sister to me," she said.

Martha Gelb, who lived, articulate and nimble-witted, to the age of 101, told me how lengthy and difficult the Melzers' working hours were as they established themselves. She said that when Marie and Mendel came home at the end of a long working day, they would wash their hands, and then turn toward preparing the evening meal. Martha herself would take little Leo, she said, and have him lie down quietly, while she spoke to him gently and heard about his day, so that his parents could have a few minutes to collect themselves, and to begin the next phase of the night.

There were gradually more friends, and a network. Fran also kept in touch with Anna Frank Wollak, with whom she had gone to elementary school in Frankenthal, and who fled Germany in 1938, settling eventually in Joliet, Illinois with her family.\*

All members of the family were trying to gradually adjust to the new country. For each of them, Mendel, Marie, Fran, Leo, and Sophie, this meant a different set of challenges.

## SOPHIE

Sophie arrived in America still shaken and vulnerable from what had gone before. She had been sent to Palestine with the Youth Aliyah because Mendel and Marie felt it would be safer for her there than in Germany. While this had seemed an obvious move for the worried parents to make, Sophie had never been able to adjust to that environment. She was part of one of the groups taken to the countryside in Palestine for settlement. No doubt, for many of the children, this group experience was positive in a number of ways. Not for Sophie. She took the mockery of the others too seriously; they found her easy to frighten. They told her that men were going to ride up on horseback and steal her away, as they wanted girls with bright red hair like hers for wives. Unfortunately, naïve Sophie believed this. She lay awake in dread at night, on guard against her capture. She missed her mother, and she wondered what was happening to her distant family—indeed, to the whole world she had known. Those around her may have had no idea just how terrified she was.

She never got over this experience. The sense of abandonment she had felt scarred the impressionable adolescent permanently. Her whole life, she remained frightened of many things, especially of being alone—her monomania, she called it.

When Mendel and Marie brought Sophie back to Germany to come to America, she entered her new life very quietly. It was difficult for her in the new country. “Sophel had it the hardest,” Leo recalls. She was no longer a child, and she was not yet an adult. She was in high school when the family arrived and at that time, textbooks for high school students needed to be bought by the parents. To their dismay, Marie and Mendel could not afford to do this. Bashful Sophie found it difficult to ask the girls at school, in her accented English, if she could please share their textbooks.

She always remained introverted. However, studied hard, finished high school, and went to the University of Minnesota. The University Commencement Program of 1943 shows that Sophie Gusti Melzer received her Bachelor of Science degree in Medical Technology.

Sophie once told me very casually that she had been surprised to find out that other students had terrible problems with organic chemistry classes—she had sailed through the classes and even enjoyed them. “Just a lot of memorization,” she said, minimizing her achievement. She was very, very smart, said my sister Claudia, but reclusive Sophie never wanted to step outside the safety of being a laboratory technician

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\* Anna Frank Wollak and her son Ted attended my wedding to David in 1995, as did many of Fran’s lifelong friends. Martha Gelb, limited in her mobility by then, sent a beautiful, loving telegram on that day. My mother and my Uncle Leo walked me down the aisle.

to pursue any wider career in science. She enjoyed the laboratory environment and her work.

Sometime in the late 1940's, she met a photographer, Neil Kaplan, a creative, kind and gentle man, and they fell in love. Their marriage was a very happy event. Marie always looked upon Neil like a son, Leo said. Uncle Neil was a warm human being who loved children, but the couple never had their own children. Sophie did not feel she could be a mother, she told me when I was seventeen. How could she have had babies, she asked me, when she was like a baby herself? How could she take care of children, she asked me, when she still felt like a child, wanting to be taken care of?

Thus did the Holocaust follow her, as it followed innumerable refugees, in a myriad of different ways.

Sophie was happy in her marriage, despite her inner demons. She and Neil moved to California, making a life in Los Angeles. She continued her work. She remained affectionately interested in the lives of all her nieces and nephews. She and Claudia always remained particularly close.

Sophie and Neil would visit Minneapolis regularly, and Marie would visit California. When Marie visited them, Sophie said, it took about four days, and then her mother would finally start to relax. Marie never just walked; she always moved quickly, with a sort of trot that all of us remember. "Mama," Neil said to her one day, "you're on vacation, why don't you slow down?" "*Ja*, OK," replied Marie in her distinctive English, "I run slow."

Aunt Sophie did have some years of relative contentment, with devoted Uncle Neil by her side. Then, Neil was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Claudia said that Sophie took armfuls of medical books home from the library at work to study the condition. There was much less known about Parkinson's disease in those days, and viable medications were only beginning to be found and used. The couple faced their situation with fortitude, but the progression of the neurodegenerative disease was inexorable. Over time, Neil slowly but steadily lost his strength. Finally, his ability to breathe became compromised; he passed away in 1985. Sophie was completely desolate without Neil, and she died soon afterward. *Zichrona livracha*.

## FRANZISKA

My mother remembers that Marie wrote to her in Palestine saying not only did she have fear of the dangers there for her girls, but that she would need her daughter beside her in the new country. With regret, Fran left her fiancé and her new community behind in Palestine, and went with her family to America. For a long time, she thought that her sojourn in America would be temporary, and that she would then return to Palestine. The family, however, Marie in particular, continued to want and to need her in America. It slowly became clear that Fran would be staying in Minnesota.

Eventually, Fran began to date, and Leo tells a humorous story about this. The first time Fran went out on a date and was not home by midnight, Marie and Mendel were worried. At one o'clock, they were more worried, and at two o'clock in the morning, they called the police. This could not have been an easy decision for the refugees, but, said

Leo this was not what young girls did back home. When the police heard what the anxious parents had to say, they started to laugh, and said they would look into it. They drove straight to the Rainbow Cafe, which was where the after-theatre crowd went, and where, said Leo, "everybody who was anybody took his date on Saturday night." There they found Fran and her date peacefully drinking coffee. There were many things for the family to get used to in the new country...

When their furniture store opened, Fran was there "from the first morning of the first day," Leo said. However, as soon as her parents could spare her, she told us, she turned her sights back toward school and the sciences. While continuing to be involved at the store, Fran was able to enroll at the University of Minnesota, despite the fact that there were still Jewish quotas in place at the U. of M.

Her field was Bacteriology, what would now be called Microbiology, she explained to us. Academic English was still a struggle for Fran. She wrestled with the chemical names: for example, she said, "ethyl alcohol" in English sounded so totally different from *Ethylalkohol* in German that at first, she did not even recognize the spoken words in class. Her test scores suffered.

She persisted, however. The University Commencement programs show that Fran received her Bachelor of Arts in 1940, and then her Masters in Medical Laboratory Sciences in 1941. After her graduation, Fran worked for a year in a bacteriology lab at Columbia University in New York. It was a good year for her in an exhilarating city, and a very exciting time in that lab, she told us; they were working on what would shortly become the first polio vaccine (the Salk vaccine).

Then, after Pearl Harbor, the United States entered the War. (My mother certainly taught us about that date, Pearl Harbor Day, December 7, 1941, just as she taught us about D-Day, June 6, 1944.)

Franziska joined the American Army and served with distinction in the Women's Army Corps, where her medical laboratory skills were put to good use. For her whole long life, Fran's Army service was one of the things of which she remained most proud. The members of her WAC unit called her "Frankie." Her war ration book, which we still have, is signed "Frank Melzer." Intrepid Fran told us with chagrin and humor that, as useful as laboratory work was, if her poor eyesight had not prevented her eligibility, she would have preferred to be a spy in Army Intelligence.

It was in the Army that she met Bernard Sandler, who became her husband in 1946, just before they were demobilized. At the University of Minnesota, Bernard went to medical school on the G.I. Bill (Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944), and became a doctor of neurology and physical medicine. Fran and Bernard had six children. The family moved, following the dictates of Bernard's hospital career, from Minneapolis, to Philadelphia, and then to New York City. The couple, though fruitful—and individually very talented people—were not well suited; they divorced in the 1970's.

Franziska continued to raise her family. She returned to school. In 1975, she received a second master's degree in Community Health Science at Hunter College in New York City, and continued to attend conferences, to travel, and to pursue a deep interest in the arts. She did volunteer work into late life. Her family and friends were at the core of things for her. She was always lovingly and keenly involved in the lives of her children and her nieces and nephews, and supportive of all their endeavors. Her

granddaughter Jessica and her grandson Daniel, and, later, her granddaughter Marya, were a great joy to her. She kept in touch with a number of her friends throughout life, for decades.

She maintained contact with her many cousins in Israel, especially Aunt Henia's daughter Ora and Aunt Golda's son Aharon, and visited Israel numerous times, even in later life. On the last of these trips, Franziska had a pleasant if poignant meeting at a café in Tel Aviv with the fiancé to whom she said goodbye so many years before. He had married, had a family, and led a satisfying life.

Paul, I know it was originally through the obituary placed in the *Seattle Times* in 2011, when our mother died, that you found our family. Rather than repeat everything therein, I am putting a link to that obituary here, despite the few small historical errors that I now know it contains:

<http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/name/franziska-sandler-obituary?pid=1000000155217084>

She made it clear that it mattered to know our own history, and she educated us about World War II and the necessity of fighting back. She stressed the importance of education and of lifelong learning. She taught us about the people and things she admired or found significant—from Dag Hammarskjöld to Edward R. Murrow, to the importance of the 1954 landmark desegregation ruling of the Supreme Court, *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Her whole life, Fran cared about the disenfranchised of the world, universally. There were causes she supported very publicly, and there were many things which she did anonymously and privately, not for personal gain or credit. We learned her principles by example.

One of many gifts she gave us all was her irrepressible sense of *joie de vivre* and enthusiasm. This zest for life, optimism and ebullience remained, no matter what Fran went through.

## ROSEL

Rosel and her husband and son came from Palestine to Minneapolis several years after the rest of the family.

“I was such a little boy, you know, when she left for Palestine,” Leo said. “And then, she was only in Minnesota with her family for a short time. What I can tell you is that she was a good person. She was quiet, different than her twin. Ah, she loved to drive, she had loved racing on the Autobahn!”

A quintessential photograph of Rosel Lange shows her in Esslingen, Germany in 1932, where the twins took pictures of each other. One sees an attractive face of strength and character, with a hint of humorous smile playing at her lips. A lovely, statuesque figure is apparent even under her well-cut winter coat. Her posture is easily erect and upright, and her hands quiet and relaxed.

Rosel Lange had flourished in Palestine. She met and married Rolf Lange, and in 1938, gave birth to a son, Zvi Koppel. (You will note the name, Paul, from your

research—Rosel named her son for his great-grandfather Melzer, Hersh Koppel. Hersh in Yiddish means “deer,” as does Zvi in Hebrew.)

The Lange family came to Minnesota in 1941, in the middle of the War. The ship manifest of the M. S. Boschfontein, found through the research of Leo’s daughter-in-law Rosemary Maher, shows that “Rosel Melzer Lange, Rolf Lange, and Zwi Lange” made their lengthy journey by ship from Palestine, via Basra, Iraq, to Los Angeles, California. We do not know who met them at the port there. Presumably, they took the train to Minneapolis.

They began to build a life in America. Things augured well for the young family. Then, when they had not yet been long in their new country, there occurred a tragedy of unutterable sadness. Rosel died in the hospital due to an unusual occurrence of medical negligence, the day she gave birth to her daughter, an event that had been anticipated so joyfully.

She was twenty-seven years old.

“What happened to her... well, if it happened now, there would be a lawsuit,” said Leo. “The hospital? Malpractice?” I asked.

“Yes,” Leo said simply. “She did not have the chance to show what she could do for the world.”

The family was completely devastated.

There had been so much loss during these years that the Melzers had awaited anxiously, even looked for. *This* loss was so undreamt of, so unexpected, that it was almost impossible to believe.

The beloved baby daughter was named Rosel Karin, after her mother. They called the infant “Rosie.” Marie, Mendel, Fran and the others gathered Rosel’s young son, four-year-old Zvi and baby Rosie to them. They tried, bereft themselves, to support Rosel’s suddenly bereft young husband, Rolf.

Immediately after the event, the adults around the children were themselves in shock, and shattered. The burden of such trauma on children is incalculable. A Yiddish song says: *Nor a mame zi iz eyne/ Zi iz eyne oyf der velt... (But a mother, she is one/ There is just one in all the world.)*

Rolf Lange eventually married again. He and Edith Sonnenshein had three more children. Rosel’s son and daughter were raised in this new family. The families stayed in touch.

Marie and Fran especially remained exceptionally close to Rosel’s children the whole of Marie’s life, and then the whole of Fran’s. Steve and Rosie always had a very special place in Fran’s heart.

The little boy who had been born Zvi Koppel in Palestine became Steven Lange and grew to manhood in America. He became a lawyer, and then a respected judge. He has remained on the bench well into his seventies. He had three children, and many grandchildren, and continues, with his wife and large family, to have an interesting life of varied activities.

Rosie Lange Jacobson became a dedicated teacher, married, and she, too, had three children, and many grandchildren. She has traveled widely and boldly. Retired now after many years of teaching, she continues to travel, to do substitute teaching, and

to do canine therapy, taking dogs around Rady Children's Hospital in San Diego to cheer up patients and their families. She is very involved in the lives of her large tribe.

How proud Rosel would have been of her children, and grandchildren, and the burgeoning generation of great-grandchildren; all generations have done and are doing creative and engaging things in life. Through them all, Rosel Melzer Lange lives on.

## MENDEL

It was my Aunt Sophie who first recounted to me in detail certain events about which our mother had spoken only with utmost brevity. The family had soldiered on during the four years following Rosel's death. Then, Leo remembers, came Mendel's visit to New York and "the letter." Sophie remembered it as "the telegram."

In 1946, Mendel Melzer went on a trip to see his brother Adolph and his family in New York. After the War ended, lines of communication with Europe had opened up. There was a Gwozdziec Club in New York, and its members were now able to be in touch with those who had survived overseas. While Mendel was in New York, the message finally came that justified all the worst fears of the brothers: the village of their birth was no more; their family had completely perished.

Today, anyone who wishes to do so can read the particulars of these crimes in detail. The account is on p. 779 of the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945, Volume I*. The Jewish inhabitants of Gwozdziec had been herded into a ghetto of several blocks, and then subsequently rounded up in the street, and shot. Those who remained inside the houses were burned with the buildings. Those who lived were ordered to collect the corpses of their families and friends and bury them in a mass grave. Anyone remaining was taken to the death camps. A very, very few managed to hide or to escape.

The brothers did not learn all those details at the time, of course. What they learned, Aunt Sophie told me, was that not one single soul remained. Leo remembers being told this as well. No one survived. Many years later, cousin Harvey Melcer verified that he was told by his father, our Uncle Adolph, that "they set fire to the houses, and everyone was burned alive" or taken to the gas chambers.

It is difficult to speak about something for which the truest response is perhaps a hush... a grave, respectful, sorrowful silence.

The family knew definitely now that all those they loved who had stayed in Poland had been exterminated—parents, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and cousins, the neighbors and friends of their youth...

The scale of the murders was unfathomable.

For Mendel Melzer, these two things together—the unforeseen death of their beloved Rosel, and then the confirmation of the murders of the entire surrounding web of their family and friends in Gwozdziec—were overwhelming. He had already been living in a state of worry and concern about those still overseas, about his children, just launching in life, about his young grandchildren, about the business, about bills, about the family's future. He was also suffering from debilitating, chronic, very painful dental problems that never seemed to abate... Now, he thought continually about what had happened in Gwozdziec.

One night, worrying, he went out for a drive, and did not return.

His body and the car were found in the morning. The car had gone off a bridge in the dark.

The circumstances of his death were unclear. What is certain is that Mendel Melzer died of a broken heart.

Marie Melzer did what she had always done. She went on, somehow. She collected her family around her. She was with her grandchildren. She was with her children. She cooked for her family. She went to synagogue. She went to work every day at the store, and indeed, she had of necessity to do so. She went on. She endured.

What happened to Mendel, Aunt Sophie explained, was the reason why when people did not come home exactly at the time they were expected, Omie always worried so...

The stunning trauma of these events that had turned their world upside down yet again was such that the Melzers did not speak about them ever after. They talked about their dear Rosel very little. They talked about those who had perished in Europe almost never. Somehow, as children, we divined without ever being told not to broach either subject. As to what was in their hearts when they looked at precious photographs in private, the family members kept their own counsel.

Marie, with Leo, quietly and regularly visited the graves of her daughter and her husband, and quietly lit *yahrzeit* candles for all those who had perished.

There were so many candles to light.

## LEO

When Mendel died, young Leo had just graduated from high school. Fran had just gotten married. Sophie had graduated and was working in her field. Leo was already enrolled for his freshman year at the University of Minnesota. Marie insisted to him, Leo told me, that nothing must get in the way of his university education. So, he went to classes at the University, and at the same time, he went to work every single day at the store.

At the age of only 18, he stepped into the role of business partner. He became, and remained, a rock of support to Marie, in the business and out, for her entire life.

In 1950, the University Commencement program once more included a Melzer. Leo, majoring in Business, received his Bachelor of Arts. One of the greatest triumphs for the immigrants Marie and Mendel, who never had the chance for a formal education, was that three of their children studied diligently, and graduated from the University of Minnesota. What oases of pride and happiness these graduations were for the family, after so much struggle. The last of these graduations, Leo's, Marie Melzer attended with Mendel Melzer not by her side, but in her heart.

In the year following his graduation from college, Leo went with a group to visit the newly formed State of Israel. It was an exhilarating trip for him in many ways. After touring intensively with the group, he went to spend two weeks in Pardes Chana with

Marie's sister, Henia Breindel Kempenich and her family. During those two weeks, many others in the family came to Pardes Chana to see Leo, or in some cases, he went to see them. He met numerous cousins, including almost all the members of the families of the three Breindel sisters of Gwozdziec.

They were an impressive group of people. Our singular Aunt Henia, to take just one example, was a *chalutza* (pioneer) who had lived on *Degania Alef*, the first *kibbutz* or *kvutza* (communal settlement) of the European immigrants in Palestine. Later, she became a farmer. All of us have many memories of Aunt Henia, with her large, twinkling eyes, and her great attention to all that went on around her. She came to America to visit more than once. With her generosity of spirit, her smile, and her all-encompassing warmth, she was able to communicate even with those of us with whom she had no verbal language in common.

The family in America has sustained a web of interactions with these families in Israel. There have been innumerable threads of connection over the years with Aunt Henia's daughter Ora, her husband Moshe of blessed memory, and their children; Henia's son Gideon, his wife Chedva and their children; Aunt Golda's son Aharon and his wife Ruthy and their children, and Aunt Hannah's daughters Maya and Dorit and their husbands and children.

You asked me, Paul, if Franziska, who loved to travel, ever returned to Frankenthal. She did not. Leo, however, *did* return to visit Frankenthal.

On his way back to Minnesota from Israel, Leo flew to Europe. He visited Paris and Frankfurt. He then went to Mannheim, where Marie's brother, Jacob Arion, who had returned briefly to Germany, met Leo at the train station, and took him to Frankenthal. They walked its streets. They went to Ludwigstrasse. They went to see an old family friend, Mrs. Gold, who, implausibly, had returned to Frankenthal and re-opened the shoe store she had had there many years ago. They went to the cemetery, looking for the graves of family members, and visited the grave of Marie and Jacob's brother, Abraham Aron Breindel. The trip to Frankenthal and Mannheim with Jacob was an important and memorable one for Leo.

Jacob Arion ultimately settled in Minneapolis, near his sister Marie, and the colorful *Onkel Jakob*, as we called him, was very much a part of our childhoods.

Joining the National Guard, Leo was eventually called up to join the Air Force. He married Fern Schloff and had two children, who he named Mendel and Tamara Rose. (You will have noted, Paul, how often in the course of this family history names recur, how often those in one generation are named in memory of those in another. My brother Mike, too, was named for his grandfather Mendel, my uncle reminds me.)

Leo became an active part of the Minneapolis business community, civic community, and Jewish community. He is justly proud of his multi-talented children, both of whom married fine people and have done very well in the world. They have been helpful to him in running the family business in countless ways. His remarkable young granddaughter Eve is a great joy to him.

## A PARTNERSHIP

Marie and Leo were business partners of great respect, amity, ease and humor for nearly 25 years. Both had a quick intelligence, and their styles dovetailed beautifully. “We think fast and we move fast,” was how Marie put it to Leo.

Slowly, over 20 years, one building at a time, the Melzers bought a block of buildings, and were able to continue to expand the store. They eventually renovated the whole block of buildings.

As noted previously, their customers came back for decades. Indeed, some of the staff people *worked* at the store for decades.

The night Marie Melzer passed away, she had put in a full day’s work at the store, leaving at 9:00 PM. Our mother, Fran, had a pleasant conversation on the phone with her that afternoon. Leo called her that evening from New York, where he had gone to attend a bar mitzvah celebration. They discussed the happenings of the day at the store, just as they always did. At 3:00 AM, Leo got another call...Marie had quietly left this world. “That is just the way she would have wanted it,” said Leo. She died beloved by many.

Leo ran the Cashway Furniture business until the year 2001. When he closed his store, he had been working there for sixty years. From its early beginnings in Frankenthal in 1921, the Melzer family business had been sustained through many incarnations for almost *eighty* years.

## “MAY WE GO TO THE STORE?”

My childhood memories are full of our visits to the family store, which took place several times a week. To us “the store” was a wonderland of varied couches, lamps, chairs, tables and beds. We felt at home there, and Marie, our *Oma* (or Omie, as we more intimately called her) was always glad to see us. We were energetic and cheerful, and loved to jump on the beds. Marie seemed to think it was fine for us to do so, even when others questioned her indulgence; it was in the nature of children to have high spirits, was it not? Leo also welcomed my mother’s unruly brood with a smile, his pipe in his mouth. When we became adults, we were amazed in retrospect at his good-natured acceptance of our somewhat noisy entrances as simply part of his busy, hectic days. The whole staff, in fact, was kindly toward the youngsters. We always exchanged warm greetings with Cousin Aron Bergman, who worked at the store for decades.

There was an old crank-operated adding machine on my grandmother’s desk in her office—black ink for addition, red ink for subtraction. I loved this adding machine, and I was allowed to climb up on her chair and use it. One day, among all the usual things, I saw two passports on the desk, one for “*Marya Melzer*,” and one for “*Sofya Melzer*.” What a different window those formal names, unfamiliar visa stamps, and serious, unsmiling photographs gave me on the lives of my grandmother Marie and my Aunt Sophel. Those names stayed in my mind: *Marya, Sofya*...

Many years later, when our daughter was born, we named her “*Marya*.”

## OMIE'S HOUSE: RITUALS

There was the store, and there was Omie's house. Marie Melzer worked in her business six days a week. She also cooked, kept an orderly home with a hospitable table, and observed the holidays. "Going to Omie's" was something Fran's brood loved to do. All of my sisters and brothers have memories of Oma's home, of the weekend dinners there. Part of a Jewish holiday was going to Omie's. The holiday table was always especially bounteous and flavorful. Omie made flavorful chicken soup with fresh dill, and there was delicious roast chicken, or a brisket, on a big central platter in the middle of everything, and Omie carved the radishes into rosettes. My brother Mike remembers that he loved to swipe his challah through the redolent gravy on that platter. My sister Claudia remembers the china gravy boat. The festive table included Omie's beautiful wine goblets, of delicately-colored etched glass.

Marie and Mendel, leaving behind everything they knew, had somehow arranged to have one crate of things, including some cherished pieces of furniture, transported to Antwerp and then shipped to them. A sturdy polished wood and glass-fronted cabinet in Omie's living room held those lovely wine glasses, brought from overseas, and her exquisitely crafted ceremonial objects. I particularly remember her silver filigree *Kiddush* cup with small turquoise stones. On the rare occasions when the younger ones among us were allowed to touch them, we knew that we must handle the fragile things from behind the spotless glass with a light touch. Somehow, we understood their importance.

The beloved pieces from Omie's cabinet—her wine goblets, her china, and her ritual objects—are now spread among many households. We have shared them. One piece that I hold dear is a porcelain and gold leaf Passover *Seder* plate brought from Germany, with the names of the traditional symbolic foods to be placed upon it inscribed in Hebrew. It is chipped. That is fine with us.

## EXTENDED FAMILY

Undoubtedly, Mendel and Marie's ability to *go on*—and then Marie's ability to go on, alone—found root partly in the stability and sustenance offered by tradition, community and family.

Family and friends remained central to her. She kept in touch with her friends, her many relatives, and her husband's relatives. Walter Pistner, son of Paul and Prudie Pistner, always remained both friend and advisor to the Melzer family. We all have vivid and fond memories of Marie's bosom friend Mrs. Goldblum.

Mendel's mother Yetta Melzer had a sister, Liba (Libby) Bergman. As did his mother Yetta, his Aunt Liba and many of her seven children perished in the Holocaust. However, one of Liba's daughters, Sprintza, had made her way to Palestine, where she married and had a family, creating another branch of the family tree.

One of Liba's sons, Aron Bergman, made his way to Minneapolis, where his uncles and then his cousins had preceded him. Aron worked at the Melzer family

furniture store for much of its entire duration, and was an important member of its team. He and his wife Mae were part of the extended Minneapolis family. Their talented daughter, Libby Bergman Cowan, and her family remain close to the other cousins in our generation to this day.

Marie traveled several times to Israel to see her family there, even once infirm health and age made this difficult to do. Fran escorted both Marie and Uncle Jacob on these later visits. Of the nine Breindel siblings of Gwozdziec, five had survived the Holocaust, and there were now many branches of the family tree in Israel and elsewhere.

To do justice to the aunts, uncles and cousins of the substantial branches of the family in Israel would be another history, and another book, so I shall not attempt it. Suffice it to say that the history of those branches is full of inspiring stories. The current family there is large, interesting and variegated, and we remain in touch.

## TRADITION AND CELEBRATION

As fundamentally as did family and community, the cycle of the Jewish holidays and rituals permeated the life of Marie Melzer in America. They were a part of her, as natural as breathing, as they had been first in Gwozdziec and then in Frankenthal. To celebrate Passover, to attend weddings and bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies, to gather for funerals, to light candles for Shabbat, for *yahrzeit*, and for Hanukkah, all provided grounding. Marie cherished these mainstays.

Without doubt, one of the things we were taught most powerfully, by example, was the importance of *celebrating*. The arrival of every *simcha*, every joyous event, was eagerly anticipated, and Marie went to every family event, near or far, to which she could manage to travel, as did Fran, as did Leo. They also taught us that whenever you can, you go to the funeral, both to honor the one passing, and to support the family.

This strong sense of occasion was never stated in words—it was simply what we saw them do.

I remember our living room filled to bursting with *all* the extended family on one *Rosh Hashanah*, celebrating the beginning of the New Year with laughter and traditional honey cake.

I remember Passover in spring at Leo's home the year his young son spoke just enough words to repeat, with prompting, the Four Questions. I remember tasting all the holiday words and songs, turning them over in my mind, *Haggadah*, *Seder*, *Motzi Matzah*, *Chad Gadya*... The older men pounded the table with their fists as they sang *Dai, Dayenu!*

I remember Hanukkah at Omie's house, lighting candles and playing *dreidel* and little bags of chocolate coins.

I remember the *bris* of Steve's oldest son, Mark, and my mother explaining to me in a whisper the ceremony of *pidyon ha-ben*.

I remember, as the *horah* music played, her taking my small five-year-old hand and teaching me the *katzka* at Leo's wedding to Fern.

For weddings and graduations, for *bar mitzvah* and *bat mitzvah* ceremonies, generation after generation, the family has traveled back and forth across the country,

sometimes across the ocean, and continued to gather with excitement and happiness. They have gathered also to support each other in times of sadness. To give certain instances and examples would be to leave out other instances and examples, so instead, let it simply be said that this coming together happens again and again.

### **“DIE KINDER”**

Her entire life, Marie was interested in the lives of each and all of her grandchildren—*die Kinder*. She gloried in their successes, empathized with their troubles, and enjoyed their exuberance. She was, in return, much beloved by them all.

Always, Marie did what she could to help her children and grandchildren in their endeavors. Our mother did the same thing. Whenever we tried to thank her, she invariably gave the same simple answer: “My parents always helped me to go forward in life. That’s just what they did. That’s what I want to do with all of you.”

Marie had a tarnished, well-worn bracelet with eight charms on it, inscribed with the names and birthdates of her first eight grandchildren- Steven, Rosie, Claudia, Michael, Karen, Julie, David and Paula. Leo’s two, Mendel and Tamara Rose, were born later, making ten. To our Oma, those ten grandchildren were each and all “*Schatzi*.”

Marie and Mendel’s ten grandchildren continue to be connected.

### **MARIE**

Every Sunday without fail, Marie watched *Meet the Press*, which was at that time the pre-eminent serious news program on television. Forward-looking Marie had a color television when these were a rarity. I can picture her as I write this. I did not understand until I was much older the deep significance of this ritual: my grandmother, watching and listening with fierce concentration to an in-depth news analysis program in English (a difficult language she first learned as she neared the age of fifty, her sixth language? seventh?) in order to stay current with what was going on. She kept her ear to the ground, always, about the state of the world, just as she and Mendel had done in Germany.

She listened to the news daily, and discussed the political situation with her friends, family and customers with great astuteness. I remember being a small child and hearing her intently exchanging views on John F. Kennedy’s candidacy before the 1960 Presidential election.

I remember Omie at our home, her hands never idle. She always quietly found a task that needed doing and proceeded to do it. She would take the pants or dresses that needed hemming, or other garments that needed mending, and go to work. As she sewed, she observed all that was going on around her with watchful eyes.

Everywhere and always, Omie saw much more than she ever spoke of aloud. She worried about her children even while she delighted in her grandchildren. She went on. Working. Cooking. Going to synagogue, lighting candles, celebrating the holidays. Who knew what it was like for her in the middle of the night, when she was alone?

She had medical problems. She had high blood pressure; certainly, all that stress had to go somewhere. Of course, these were things about which Omie never let on to us.

Only as we got older did she occasionally begin to confide a private worry to one of us, especially to Claudia, the responsible and thoughtful eldest of Fran's brood.

We could not possibly, as children, appreciate the astonishing strength of our grandmother. She was simply... our Omie, with her low-heeled, unfashionable shoes, her voluminous black handbag, and her singular walk/run. We accepted as our due, if we ever thought about it at all, her enormous, unconditional love and her pride in her American grandchildren, even as we affectionately copied, when she was not there, her guttural, heavily-accented English. It was our *homage* to her. My sister Karen and brother David still remind us all of the vivid, picturesque words Omie created in her own unique English dialect. We always understood what those words meant.

We adored her. However, appreciation of who and what she truly was? Of her fortitude, her uncomplaining bearing up under literally backbreaking burdens? No, not in our youth. Every decade of our lives since, however, has deepened our admiration and awe.

Despite all that happened to her, Marie Melzer was a woman who inhabited the world around her here and now, and who looked to the future with open eyes. She continued on without falling into the black vortices of either hate or fear. She neither shut out the rest of the world, nor limited her caring to one narrow band of it. She had no self-righteousness, no drama, and no self-pity. She was indomitable. The example of Marie's extraordinary and breathtaking *resilience* stays with us all. When things fell down around her, she focused on rebuilding.

## REBUILDING AND REPAIRING

It is a fine thing to be able to see, Paul, that there are two websites, *Juden-in-Frankenthal*, and *Alemannia-Judaica*, where much of the work that you have done is now reflected: [Geschichte der Juden in Frankenthal - Förderverein für jüdisches Gedenken Frankenthal](#) and [www.alemannia-judaica.de/.../Frankenthal%20Stolpersteinbuch%20](#)

It is also heartening to see the many actions of remembrance that are taking place all over Germany, and in Frankenthal in particular. Reading about the long-term *Stolpersteine* project is particularly poignant.

You found that Rosel and Fran probably went to the Pestalozzi School, and then to the Karolinen School in Frankenthal. So, you can imagine how moving it was for me to read about the 2013 Action Day at the current Karolinen Gymnasium in Frankenthal on the *Juden in Frankenthal* website, and to see in one of the photographs a circle of young people with the caption: *A human chain around the Karolinen-Gymnasium should make it clear. The high school has the title "school without racism - school with courage."*

You have written at length, Paul, about the Frankenthal synagogue. The synagogue in which the little girls laughed on the High Holidays about Franzel's swooping charm bracelet was destroyed in 1938.

So, too, in 1941, was the beautiful Gwozdziec synagogue destroyed, during the Nazi occupation. Recently, in a rather dramatic international collaboration project, the Gwozdziec synagogue has been *rebuilt*, in all its beauty, color and detail. A replica of its *bimah* and its intricately painted vaulted ceiling and roof are now part of the core exhibition inside the POLIN Museum in Warsaw, on the site where the Warsaw Ghetto once stood.

It seemed to me somehow a good omen that in 2011, while I was doing research on Gwozdziec to write my mother's obituary, I came by chance across this remarkable reconstruction project. Probably, Paul, you have come across it as well. Here are two informative links:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/16/arts/16iht-synagogue16.html>  
<http://www.handshouse.org/gwozdziec/>

The 2015 documentary film *Raise the Roof* chronicles this reconstruction.

## LEGACY

When Leo recounted the story of his mother's frantic all-night search for a way to release Mendel from prison, I said, "Your son knows that story well." "Yes," said Leo. "We tried over the years to tell them some things, but...we never did too much of it, because...I didn't want...we didn't want them... I don't know whether it was because it hurt too much to talk about it, or because you try to put it out of your mind and say, it's in the past, thank God, we're not...we're...it's different now..." "Or both of those?" I asked. "Both of those, he said, "that's right."

What Leo wants now, he says, is to make sure that the descendants of the family know their story.

In 1977, Rose Selcer Zimmerman and Celia Selcer Saks, the two daughters of Mendel's Uncle Charlie, completed an extensive project. Years before the ease of home computers and online genealogical websites, Rose, assisted by Celia, had researched extensively and created a detailed family tree of the Selcer/Melzer/Melcer clan, beginning in the 1800's. The sisters sent a copy of this tree, on parchment paper, with an accompanying short family history, to every single relative they knew or could find. This family tree hangs, framed, on the walls in many of our homes. In 1980, they sent out an update.

In 2010, in Israel, my Aunt Henia Breindel Kempenich's son Gideon and his wife Chedva helped me to complete a family tree of the Breindel side of our family, which I had begun with my mother many years before.

The grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Marie and Mendel Melzer, and of the Melcer, Selcer and Breindel families on the family tree, have moved out widely into the world. There are now a large number of *great* great-grandchildren, and their numbers continue to increase.

A sweeping arc of professions is represented. Among us, we have entered the ranks of committed teachers, inventors, business people, research scientists, doctors,

lawyers, judges, administrators, farmers, *kibbutzniks*, soldiers, military officers, information technologists, actuaries, musicians, visual artists, dancers, policemen, flight attendants, public office holders, artisans, union representatives, economists, university professors, investment bankers, entrepreneurs, social workers, physiotherapists, scholars, writers, world travelers, and more.

We have capitalists and socialists, secular Jews and observant Jews, idealists and pragmatists, hawks and doves. We have strong supporters of a two-state solution in the Middle East, with equal rights for Palestinians, and citizens of all nationalities, in the two states. A number of us have chosen to study history deeply and carefully. A sizeable proportion of the tree's descendants are committed to working for social, economic and racial justice, and against oppression in all its forms; we have some firebrands among us. We have our cynics, too. And we also have many who prefer quiet, hidden roads and the private sphere.

As a family, we identify strongly as Jews, and at the same time, the circles of our families and friends are of every religion, race, creed, gender orientation, and of numerous nationalities. Our tree has been strengthened by many kinds of intermarriage.

We have settled in cities in many parts of the world. Numerous branches of the family abound all over the United States and Israel, and in England, Canada, Switzerland, and other countries as well. The tree continues to branch out and to blossom, to put down new roots and to put forth new shoots. It is a large, complex, multi-colored, blazing tree.

Having children is only one way of contributing to a family tree. The roots of that tree have been and will be watered and nourished by those, like Aunt Sophie, like Uncle Jacob, whose legacy is what they left in the hearts and memories of the family. As well, the tree will continue to draw nourishment from the work that people will leave behind.

A clear eye will not let one idealize *any* family. The Melzers had the flaws and foibles of all human beings, balancing their sterling qualities. They had the full complement of joys and sorrows, pettiness and grandeur, rivalries and generosity, bickering and fineness that any family has.

What *is* true without doubt is that the family, like countless other refugee families, started its life over again from scratch—an act of real courage.

It took perseverance, and single-minded, purposeful tenacity. The family also had the bravery to take leaps of faith—to risk. This was in no way blind optimism; it required a practical, open-eyed realism.

Perhaps what the Melzers did was more admirable precisely because the dark side, the undertow, was always there. It is impossible that such trauma as the family experienced would not leave deep scars.

A mix of grief, gratitude, remembrance, anxiety, survivor guilt, the need to make something of this gift of life, appreciation for the freedoms of a democracy, and hypersensitivity to the political climate, all formed a complicated emotional substrate in the family, as it did in most families who had escaped from the Holocaust.

Simply the fact that they, by good fortune, were alive when so many of those they knew and loved had been murdered was something that permeated their worldview, their actions, indeed, their very cellular structure.

There was a feeling of deep responsibility to those who had perished, since the refugees had themselves received a new chance. The family valued highly the

opportunities of their new country, and taught the importance of civic participation to their descendants.

Not hiding one's head in the sand, keeping informed about what is happening every day in the surrounding world, and speaking out against history repeating itself are all strong parts of their legacy.

We have been taught to take heed of the disenfranchised people around us. Engagement with the plight of refugees and immigrants here and now is as crucial as it has ever been.

Marie and Mendel and their children demonstrated that it was possible to start over against the odds...again and again.

We learned from the lives they led that one need not, and indeed, must not, allow oneself or one's family to be defined by tragedy or trauma alone—neither as a Jew, nor as a citizen of the world.

Life is lived in the present tense. This is their legacy to our generation and to the generations that follow.

We remember them all, with gratitude and love.

*Julie Sandler-Friedman*  
*With the blessing of Leo Melzer*  
*New York City, April 3, 2017*