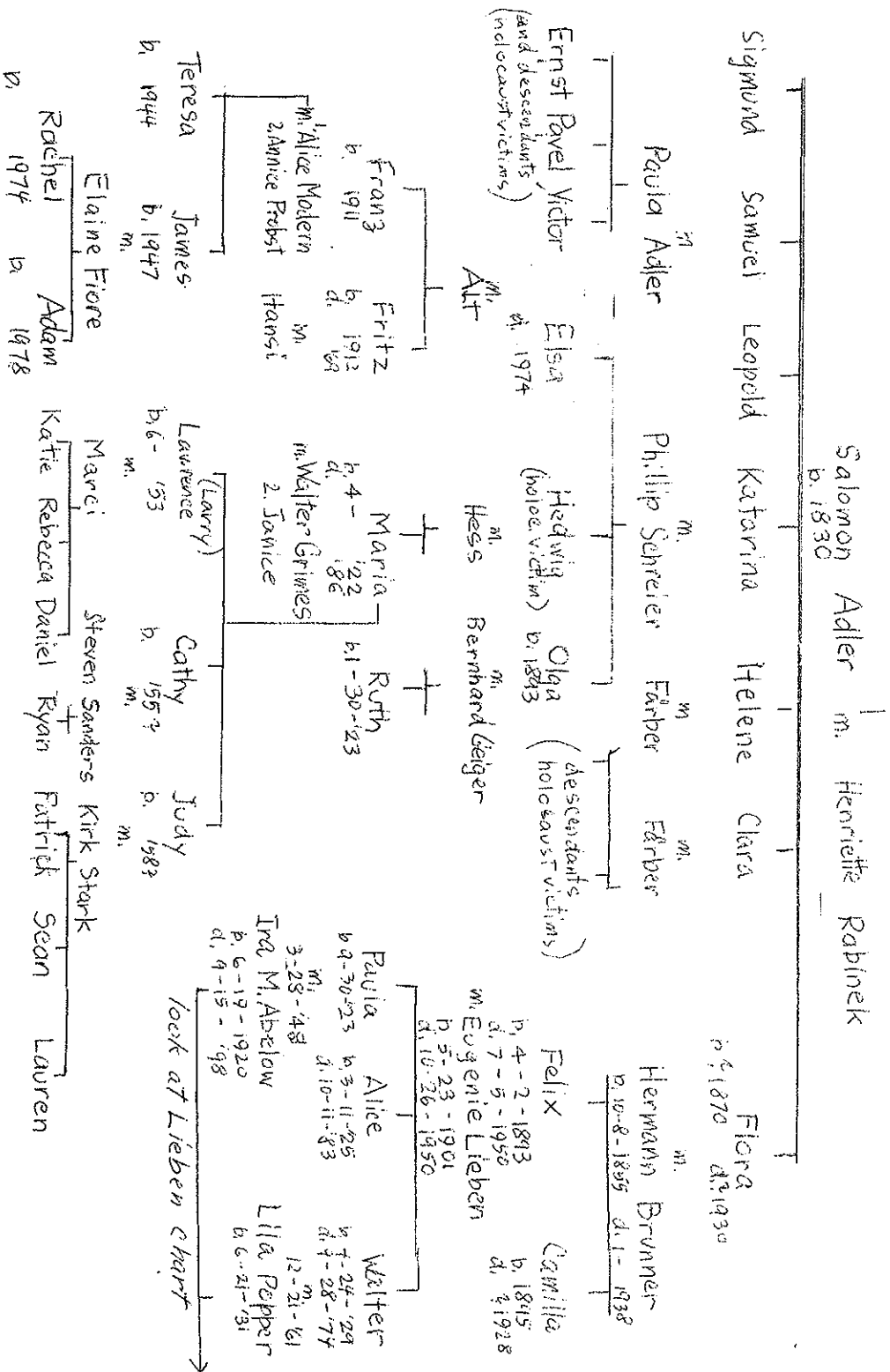
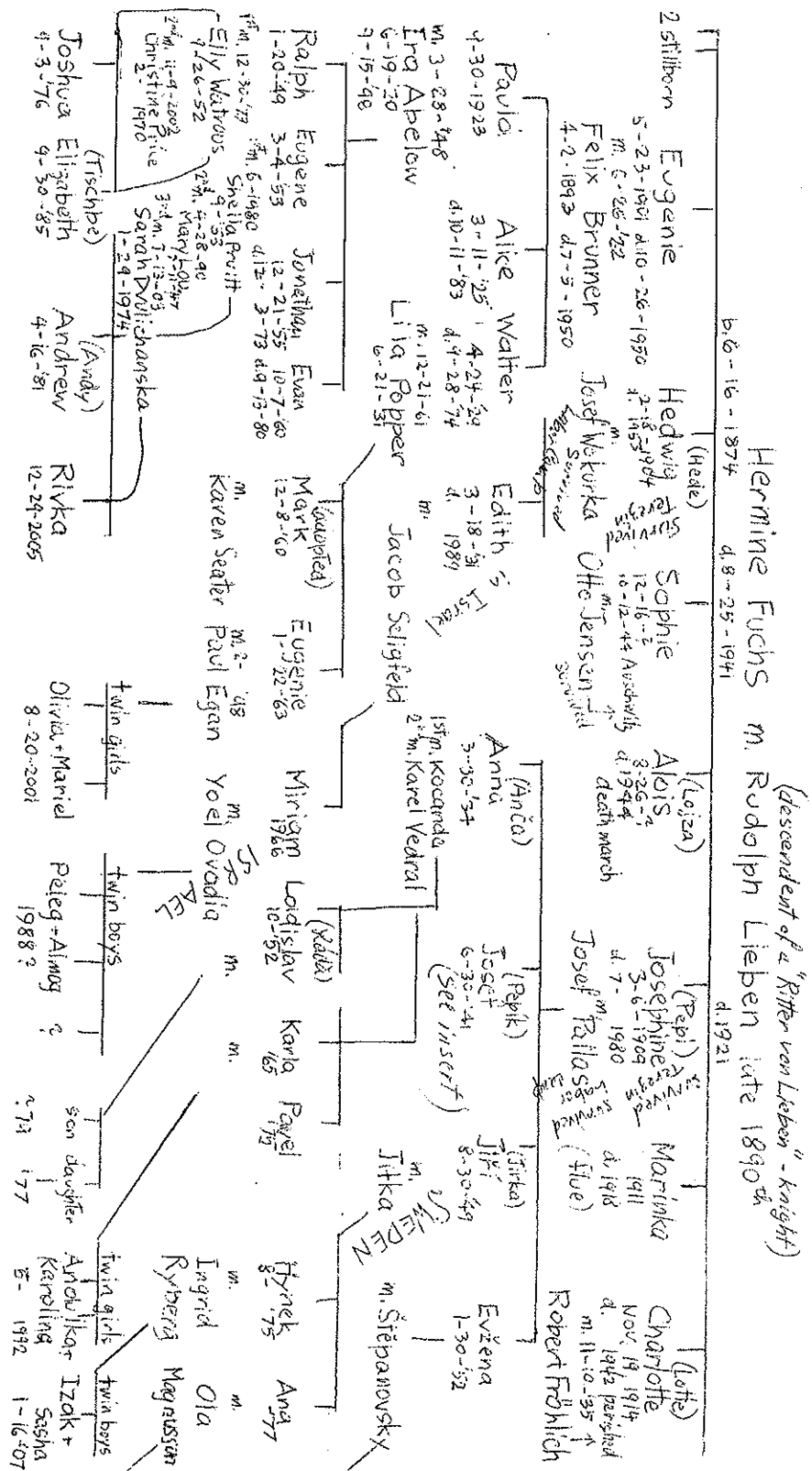


# THE BRUNNER LIEBEN STORY

As recollected by  
PAULA BRUNNER ABELOW  
July 2007





cont. from preceding page

(Pabik)  
Josef  
6-30-41

1<sup>st</sup> m.  
2<sup>nd</sup> m. Majka

(Pabik) (Kata)  
Josef Kataarina  
174

m.  
Anna  
Wedholm

son  
Sara

3 sons  
Jirka

Louise  
Jirka  
4-11-106

## **Parental Background**

My father, Felix Brunner, was born on April 2, 1893 to Herman Brunner and Flora Adler Brunner in Brno (Brünn) Moravia, then the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. He had a younger sister, Camilla.

A musician with perfect pitch, Felix whistled classical music beautifully. And he played the violin quite well, even seriously. Early on, though, his father discouraged him from seeking a career as a concert violinist, since it would be too difficult a life.

So he earned a degree in textile engineering, but built his livelihood, instead, on an interest that developed when he was just seven years old: postage stamps, with a special interest in Austrian stamps. His father, by profession an insurance representative, also became interested in stamps through the influence of his son.

During World War I, my father was drafted into the Austrian Army. Luckily, he was not sent to the front. After the war, he moved from Brno to Prague (Praha) in Bohemia, which was then the capital of the new republic of Czechoslovakia.

On New Year's Eve of 1920, at a B'nai B'rith Lodge function, he met Eugenie Lieben, a private secretary to the artistic director of the New German Theater in Prague.

Eugenie was born in Prague on May 23, 1901 to shop owners Rudolph Lieben and Hermine Fuchs Lieben. Hermine gave birth to ten children, the first two of whom died in childbirth. Eugenie, born next, became the eldest daughter of a large family, including Hedwig (called Hede), Sophie (nicknamed Žofinka or Sonia, by her husband), Alois (called Loisa), Josephine (called Pepi, born in 1909), Marinka

(born in 1911, died at age 7 of the flu epidemic), and Charlotte (called Lotte, born in 1914).

## **Getting Married & Starting a Family**

Felix and Eugenie were planning to get married in June 1921, but due to the death of her father (from liver cancer), the wedding was postponed for a year to June 26, 1922. Unfortunately, by that time, Felix was seriously ill with a bone infection called osteomyelitis that had settled in his knee. An operation removed the puss from his left knee, but that leg became stiff – a condition that persisted for the rest of his life. Post-surgery, he was allowed to leave the hospital to get married, but then had to return to recuperate.

Communication between Felix and Eugenie was not a problem. Brought up in German-speaking surroundings, Felix had not started learning Czech until he was an adult. Eugenie was already bi-lingual, however, since both Czech and German were spoken in her home. So, as newlyweds, they spoke German.

By the early 1920s, having been a stamp collector since he was seven years old, Felix already had a significant private collection and decided to make his living by becoming a stamp dealer.

I (Paula) was their first child, born in Prague on September 30, 1923. For the first year of my life, we lived with my grandmother, Hermine, and her children in an age-old walk-up apartment house in Old Town. Then we moved to a spacious apartment that had room, at one end, for the office and stamp business. It was a prime location two blocks from the Czech National Theatre on the quay (dock) of the Moldau (Vltava) River. Located on the third floor, the apartment had a superb view from all four front rooms onto the Moldau with its islands, bridges, and hills across

the river, with the Petřín Tower (a miniature Eiffel Tower) on one side and the extended castle Hradčany with St. Vitus Cathedral on the other. (The address used to be Riegerovo Nabřeží 28; now it is Masarykovo Nabřeží 30.)

On holidays, fireworks exploded from the river, and the castle area was always illuminated at night. We watched in awe from the small semicircular balcony off the formal dining room.

My sister, Alice, was born on March 11, 1925. Four years later, on April 24, 1929, my brother, Walter, was born. At that time, I was quarantined in a hospital with scarlet fever and only saw the new baby all bundled up from an upstairs window.

Throughout these years, the stamp business flourished, as Father went on frequent business trips throughout central Europe, including Germany, Austria, Italy, and Switzerland. Requiring two or three employees, the business occasionally hired family members as secretaries, including my Aunt Sophie and later my Aunt Lotte.

While Father tended to the growing business, my mother took care of the household. A very sociable woman, my mother enjoyed company and was always prepared to tell jokes to her guests. However, as a person whose vocation and avocation were the same – philately – my father was a workaholic. Mother had a hard time tearing him away from his desk to entertain visitors.

Mother's jobs were to manage the help – including a live-in cook, cleaning lady and live-in governess – and raise the children. Of all our governesses, Anči was our favorite. Anči was with us for a number of years. We kept in touch with her and saw her in 1964 when she came to Austria, while Pepi and daughter, Eugenie, were also there. After Anči's death, Jarmilka (her daughter) kept in touch and we see her and her family, the Benešes, every time I visit Prague.

In addition to taking care of us, Mother had time to take private Italian and French lessons. She had a great talent for languages, eventually also speaking Spanish and English.

The early years were very pleasant. Since Father could not drive a stick shift because of his stiff knee, we had a chauffeur for the car, an Austro-Deimler. On some weekends, our driver would take the whole family out of the city into the country for long excursions.

Our six-floor apartment building was a great place to grow up, with four other families living there. On the ground floor was a commercial outfit, The Toledo Scales, which placed a huge scale on the street next to the front door for promotional purposes. We children liked to get weighed on it. Two of the other tenants were bankers, one of whom was Jewish. They, too, had cars and chauffeurs. We were friends with their daughters.

There was a park-like island with a playground right across from us that we called Zofin; its formal name was Slovansky Ostrov. It had a little wooden bridge connecting it to the quay, where we were allowed to go without supervision once we were school age. When we wanted to go farther, “Fraülein” or “Slečna” would accompany us.

### **Lighthearted Summer Vacations**

Every summer, we spent two glorious months in the country. Grandmother Hermine and her youngest daughter, Lotte, would often vacation with us. Lotte was like a big sister; it was great to have her around. My parents rented a small house in Hirschberg (Doksy), a small resort by a lake. Every day, we walked on a path



through a fir forest to the sandy beach and spent hours swimming. My parents would sometimes swim together across the lake to Thamül, another little resort, accompanied by a rower and a rowboat, just in case they got too tired. Despite their handicaps, they were both strong swimmers. Mother's eyesight gradually deteriorated from her mid-twenties on because of retinitis pigmentosa, a hereditary disease causing progressive vision loss, which affected her sister, Pepi, as well.

After a picnic lunch near the beach, we children took a nap or rested in the nearby woods, often on a hammock strung between the trees. Because I hated the smell of the hammock, I lay on a blanket.

One year when I wasn't four years old yet, we went on vacation to Cirkvenica, a beach resort in Yugoslavia, on the Adriatic Sea, staying in a hotel this time. Alice and I lost our appetite due to the hot weather; the only thing we liked was "sladoled" – ice cream! Of course, we liked the water and playing in the sand. I tanned very quickly and with my dark curly hair people would ask my mother if I was black!

In 1930 and 1931, when I was 7 and 8, we went to the East Sea, to Binz, on the Island of Rugen in Germany. This was before Hitler took power. The weather there was more agreeable. When we got older we went to various children's camps, usually in Czechoslovakia and once to Grado in Italy not far from Trieste on the Adriatic. Grado must have been the beach for many children's camps, because next to our spot was a camp with Italian children and we heard them sing "Jovenezza" (meaning "youth"), a catchy tune which we picked up and brought home. Mother was startled – it was an Italian Fascist song!

## Life in Prague

In those years, Grandmother Hermine owned a tiny store in a passageway in Old Town, offering fabric and lace remnants. As small as a walk-in closet, the shop had a movable counter separating the customers from the vendor. As a little girl, I liked to visit her and “help” her. It was a thrill to get behind the counter and pretend to sell fabric pieces. Grandmother loved to crochet and knit, saying all her worries went into her handiwork. She made a crocheted lace tablecloth for Alice and me for our dowry. I still have mine; it’s as good as new.

We saw a lot of Grandmother. She came to us regularly for Sunday dinner. I can still see her, a small woman with a roundish face, dancing the waltz with my father, a tall man, in the living room, her face aglow with music and memories. Father also taught Alice and me the Viennese waltz; he was a good dancer, despite his stiff left leg.

Mother’s sisters and brother – Hede, Sophie, Pepi, Lotte and Alois – were also frequent visitors to our house. Since Mother was the first in her family to get married, she often invited her younger siblings to dinner. Except for Alois, they all married eventually. Sophie married Otto Jensen; Pepi married Josef Pallas; Hede married Josef Wokurka. Then, in 1935, Lotte, the last to wed, married Robert Fröhlich, a watch specialist.

Grandmother spent years researching her husband’s family tree and was quite proud of having traced it back to the Ritter (or Knight) von Lieben. Unfortunately, this cherished document got lost in the rapid escape from Prague and was never recovered. (The family name of Lieben, I discovered when I went to Israel, is a Germanized word for a town near Prague, called Libeň, which is now part of Prague. Prior to that trip, we had assumed that the Lieben name came from the German word for love.)

Prague winters were cold. When the river was frozen, we'd go ice-skating. When the ice wasn't hard enough, we'd walk to an island, called Střelecký Ostrov, where they poured water on a tennis court that made a safe frozen surface for skating. One year, I think it was 1929, it was so cold that the river froze solid enough for the trucks to drive on. We worried about huge icicles falling down on us.

### **The Move: From Art Deco to Ultra Modern**

In 1935, we left our happy art deco apartment with the beautiful view of the river to relocate to the center of town (address: Jungmanová 9) to a brand new building on an inner street. Why such a drastic change? Because Mother wanted more modern conveniences. For instance, we replaced our icebox with an electric refrigerator. Instead of a coal stove in the kitchen, and the coal-fed ceramic fireplaces in the other rooms (beautiful structures that reached all the way up to the ceiling), we had the comforts of a gas stove and central heating.

Of course, we children missed the excitement of coal delivery day, when we watched with intrigue as the silent waiter hauled up the coal that was then stored in a bin on the back balcony. Our parents were less excited about our watching, of course, because we inevitably turned black with soot on those days.

The new apartment also included two offices for the stamp business, one private office for my father and the other shared by his two employees, a bookkeeper, Mr. Löw (a hunchback), and a secretary, Miss Sporniková. She became seriously ill with tuberculosis and would have died if Father had not sent her to a sanitarium and paid for her stay, for which she was forever grateful. On my first visit to Prague in 1974, I saw Miss Sporniková, who had married. She looked

healthy, her face filled out in contrast to my memory of her: skinny, gaunt, her face skull-like. Thanks to my father's kindness, she lived to an old age.

By this time, Father's father, Herman Brunner, was getting up in years. He had long lived alone in Brno, following the untimely death of his wife, Flora, followed by the loss of his daughter, Camilla. So he came to live with us in our new apartment, where he had a room to himself. An aide would take him for walks and play chess with him. Grandfather even taught Walter how to play that difficult game.

For us, middle school – 6<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grades – was located in the Old Town on “Masná” (Meat Market). Boys and girls attended classes in separate buildings, which was new to us, since elementary school had been coed. It was a twenty-minute walk from the apartment house in New Town. School started at 8 am. At 10 am, we had a snack break consisting of a sandwich and a piece of fruit. On most days, we left school at 1 pm, except on those days when we had home economics. There, we learned how to cook, among other things – and were required to eat what we made. The philosophy was simple: pay close attention to what you are doing, since you'll have to eat your mistakes!

## **My Early Teen Years**

At 14, I began studies at an Academy of Commerce – Handelsakademie – since at the time I wanted to be a secretary like my aunts who worked for my father. Earlier, Alice and I joined a Jewish sports organization, “Hagibor” (meaning the hero or strong one), where we went swimming.

We took rhythmic dancing and gymnastics from Herr Rauscher. Alice, who was taller than I, excelled at gymnastics. We were doing this while mother would exercise in another room with ladies, with a lady instructor. Afterward, mother

would take us to a nearby sweet shop café called Štěrbá, and buy us some petits fours.

In the summer of 1938, we went on vacation to the Italian Riviera, to Viareggio, staying in a hotel not far from the beach. Father took Alice and me for a few days of sightseeing in Florence, Pisa, and Bologna. During this trip he also attended to some business, while Mother stayed with Walter in Viareggio. Later that summer we went to Lake Como and then on to Switzerland, where we visited Luzerne and stayed in Wengen in the Berner Oberland (Highland) for a couple of weeks. While there, Alice participated in a swim race. She did very well, but we didn't know that her only competitor was a professionally trained girl who easily won first place. Alice was understandably upset. This was to be our last European family vacation.

In September 1938, we went back to our respective schools: I to the second year at the Academy of Commerce, Alice to middle school, and Walter to elementary school. Walter, as the youngest, was the only one to go to a Czech public school. Father had sent Alice and me to German-speaking public schools, because he thought the newly established Czech schools – launched after Czechoslovakia became independent from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 – were inferior with less experience. But by the time Walter started first grade in 1935, Hitler was already in power in neighboring Germany, and the Czech schools had improved markedly.

Almost 15, I was about to start taking dance lessons. I remember two young boys from the Hagibor or Maccabee organization coming to the apartment and explaining to my parents and me about the dance lessons. I was really looking forward to it, and was already picturing myself in a pink, flouncy dress for the occasion.

## **Our World Changed**

However, around the 10<sup>th</sup> of September, Father went to Zurich, Switzerland to show his private stamp collection at an International Stamp exhibit. His collection consisted of cancelled Austrian stamps, including valuable first editions with alphabetically arranged cancellations of the many towns in Austro-Hungary. He had won several first-place trophies for this collection and was well known in his field, with clients located throughout central Europe, including Italy.

While there, one of his clients, Count Ciano, a high official in the Italian government, advised Father that there would be war. Count Ciano told Father not to return to Czechoslovakia himself and to get his family out right away.

Father's exhibit in Switzerland was taking place at the same time as the conference held in Munich, Germany, culminating in the infamous Munich Agreement (referred to as the "appeasement"). Signed on September 28, 1938 by the major European powers – including France and Britain, supposedly allies of Czechoslovakia – the agreement permitted the German annexation of the Sudetenland.

How did this happen? The Sudetenland, consisting of natural, mountainous borders, included sections of northern and western Bohemia and northern Moravia, giving it enormous strategic importance. Formerly part of Austria, the predominantly Germany-speaking area was incorporated into Czechoslovakia after World War I. Originally, Hitler's demand that the region be ceded to Germany was rejected. Later, however, the Nazi party exploited the discontent among Sudeten Germans, convincing Britain and France that, to avoid war, Czechoslovakia must be persuaded to give the region autonomy.

While the purpose of the conference was ostensibly to discuss the future of the country, Czechs were not invited to participate. As a result, Czechs and Slovaks

often refer to the agreement as the Munich Dictate. After World War II, in 1945, the region was restored to Czechoslovakia, which expelled its German inhabitants and repopulated the area with Czechs.

## **Our Escape**

Father was well informed about politics. He was also an optimist. He had been making a good living in Prague. The country was a democracy and he had never thought of leaving. But this news from his Italian friend made him act fast. First he called my mother and instructed her to pack two suitcases full of his best merchandise, take them to the post office, and ship them to him in Switzerland, under the pretext that the stamps were for his exhibit.

Then, because he was leery about our having to cross borders through Austria and Germany and because he was able to pay for it – thanks to the availability of funds he had deposited from foreign sales into a Swiss bank – he was able to charter a Swiss plane to come and get us.

The plane had capacity for about 30 passengers, so Father told Mother to invite her four sisters with their spouses, as well as her brother and her mother, to come along, plus any friends who wanted to come.

We packed our clothes, some piano music, and the photo albums Mother had created for each of us, filled mostly with photos that she herself had taken. (Because Mother used a Rolleiflex – a camera that allowed her to look down through a lens and see a clear picture of us – she was able to capture our childhoods in the beautiful square images that the Rolleiflex produced, even with her bad eyesight.) We were not to talk about our impending departure to anyone. It was a big secret. I did, though, visit my classmate and girlfriend, Friedl Kienzl (now Levitt in Vancouver, Canada), before leaving.

Since Czechoslovakia was preparing to go to war, we were not allowed to take any money out of the country. The plan was for us to fly out of Ruzín Airport near Prague at noon. But all of us were searched, especially mother, whom they (the Czechs), detained for six hours. By the time they let her go, she was a nervous wreck. When the authorities asked me if I had brought any money, I said I had one crown that my grandfather had given me. They let me keep it.

Our aunts and uncles all came to the airport to bid us farewell. But only grandmother Hermine and a couple of non-Jewish friends who were Swiss citizens flew with us. One of them was the wife of our faithful bookkeeper, Mr. Löw. We finally departed for Zurich, Switzerland at 6 pm on September 20, 1938. It was a beautiful flight into a sunset that seemed to last forever, since we were flying west.

In Zurich we stayed in a hotel for a few days. By then the Allies – France and Britain – sold Czechoslovakia to Hitler, giving him the Sudetenland as part of the infamous “appeasement” policy described above. Six months later, Hitler took all of Czechoslovakia.

Since there was no war, grandmother Hermine decided to go back to Prague, because she was lonesome for her other children. She died in August 1941, a year before the transports started.

I feel very lucky that Father had the foresight not to return with our family to Prague. We originally left because we thought war was coming – and he felt that the Allies had let Czechoslovakia down. As history proved, getting out in time saved our lives. By leaving as precipitously as we did, though, we left our apartment fully furnished with silver, paintings, and crystal. For six months, my father – or someone on his behalf – paid our rent for the apartment. During this period, our relatives and paid employees packaged most of our paintings, some silverware, and Father’s



trophies that they shipped to my parents in New York. Some of the artwork that now hangs in my home used to grace the walls of my childhood apartment in Prague.

When the Germans invaded Prague in March 1939, they confiscated everything that was left in the apartment.

### **Starting Over in Switzerland**

So we settled into our new lives in Switzerland, our parents sending us to a small coed boarding school called Les Rayons in Gland on the Lake of Geneva. It was run by a German refugee couple, Mr. and Mrs. Bondi, who were born Jewish, but had been baptized as Christians. They had run a school in Germany before opening Les Rayons. The predominant language at the school was German, so Walter – who had attended only Czech-speaking schools – had to adjust to a new language.

Our school was in the French part of Switzerland, so we had a native, Mr. Lyrer, teach us French. We also started learning English (British). Aside from summer camps, we had never been away from home. So the whole boarding experience was new to us, including the way the school encouraged freedom of expression. Furthering this sense of independence was our new ability to choose our own clothes. Back in Prague, Mother had dressed Alice and me in matching outfits to avoid any jealousy about who looked better in which clothes. Here, we could wear what we wanted.

Les Rayons even had a student government. When we first arrived, we were seen as very shy and reserved, since we had come from a very strict upbringing, with Mother as the disciplinarian. So it was actually a welcome relief to be in the new surroundings, coed no less!

I remember my first crush on an older teacher, a Monsieur Mandry who was about 30. I remember being quite unhappy when he left the school.

My first boyfriend at Les Rayons was Otschi Lobbenberg. An intellectual, he helped me write an essay about the eclipse of the moon. Honestly, I was too lazy to do it myself, so I asked him to help. Not too long after that, he left for England because his uncle invited him to come work in his corset factory. A few years later, I saw him again in New York, when he came to visit. He proposed to me, but I turned him down; I felt that he was too intellectual for me.

My second boyfriend in Switzerland was Abby Popper. He claimed not to be Jewish – because so many people there were either ashamed of being Jewish or afraid of being known as Jews. But given his last name, we knew he was Jewish. He liked to “swing,” making up his own dance style. For me, the memorable part was that he gave me a pair of pants to iron, and I had never ironed in my life. Instead of admitting that, I accepted the pants and spent several hours working on them. He wondered what took so long! Eventually, he went to England; although at one point, I heard that he’d been shot down, I discovered later that he had survived.

I wasn’t alone in having crushes. Alice, then 13-1/2, had a crush on Herbert, the oldest son of our housemother at Les Rayons, Mrs. Duschenes. Herbert traveled by train to Geneva every day to attend college. Mrs. Duschenes was a very nice person and the mother of four sons ranging in age from 14 to 24. She held weekly meetings with us during which we’d discuss problems and listen to good music. A good friend of Mrs. Bondi’s, Mrs. Duschenes was permitted to have three of her sons stay at the school in return for her services. (Her fourth son was missing – and never found – in the Alps.)

Alice and I took piano lessons there, continuing studies that we’d started in Prague with a conservatory student named Jaroslava Vojtěčkà, practicing on the

baby grand Steinway in our home. Walking with a limp because of her clubfoot, Jaroslava had lovely hair that hung in long tubular ringlets around her pretty face. In Switzerland, we took lessons from Mademoiselle Sharon who came once a week from Geneva to give private lessons to willing students. She gave recitals to the whole student and faculty body. Years later in New York, I continued my piano studies with my second cousin Ruth Geiger, a concert pianist and graduate of the Juilliard School of Music, playing on a console piano that Father bought me.

The Swiss school also furthered my lifelong love of art. Right after we arrived at Les Rayons, my parents gave me a watercolor set for my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. Art was my best subject in school. With all the beauty around Lac Lemman, I was inspired then and there to become an artist. My parents saw my talent, enabling me to take art courses wherever we went, from Mexico to California to New York.

Along with other students, I remember helping to plant a victory (or war) garden there, weeding the pathways, etc. Victory gardens were designed to help reduce food shortages caused by the war, which did affect us at Les Rayons. In fact, the father of one of the students, a Swiss girl from a local farm, provided milk for the whole school. So we were very lucky to have Noelle, so named because she was born on Christmas, with us at school.

The other students were all refugees, too, from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. Some were Jewish, although most of them were half-Jews, with one parent having been Jewish, but practicing Christianity. At the time of our arrival, there were around 90 children from Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The number dwindled as parents found new countries to live in.

## Seeking A Safe Haven

Although we children – as students – were allowed to stay in Switzerland, our parents could not, because of the country's ban on refugees. So, first they went to France, then decided it was too close to the action. Although they were well traveled in Europe, they had never been across the ocean, and so they decided to “try” the United States.

They came to this country on visitor visas on the “Normandy” in December 1938. Once in New York, they realized this was the place to be. They thought they could bring us over quickly, but it actually took them 15 months because of a misunderstanding. The owners of the boarding school on Lake Geneva had told Mother and Father that they were bringing the school to the U.S., so my parents were under the false impression that we children would come with it. In fact, the Bondis did start a school in Vermont, but not with the students from Switzerland. Instead, the Bondis named the assistant director, Mr. Baruschke, to take over as head of Les Rayons. As an Arian, he was allowed to travel to Nazi Germany to recruit Arian students whose parents wanted them to be safe. Timing, though, was not on his side. The war had started on September 1, 1939. After an initial influx, there were no more new refugee children coming, and the school struggled to survive. Eventually, at some point after we left in the beginning of March 1940, it closed.

Our parents were able to get us transit visas to the U.S. after proving we would not stay, but would immigrate to Mexico. For the first part of our journey, we were put on a train for Genoa, Italy, where an Italian-Jewish friend, Mr. Conti, a bachelor, looked after us and took us shopping. Father had some money in Italy and he wanted us to spend it on goods to bring with us (like bicycles). But we were completely ignorant about shopping, having been brought up in a sheltered environment where our parents had done all the buying.

When we showed up with only a few minor purchases, like stationery, our parents were very disappointed. Even Mr. Conti had not been much help in our shopping quest. But he saw us off on the “Manhattan,” a ship full of refugees.

## **Our First Taste of America**

We arrived in New York Harbor in the middle of March 1940, but were not allowed on the mainland for two long weeks.

Actually, we were detained on Ellis Island, not considered part of the U.S. proper, looking at the powerful image of the Statue of Liberty through the high fence. The detention was caused by officials’ concern that we did not have the proper visas – and the fear that we would try to stay in the United States, instead of moving on to Mexico. This was primarily a documentation issue: our parents had received visitor visas for the U.S., valid for one to two years. But they were able to get only transit visas for us, good for just a few weeks, designed to get us into and out of the U.S., then on to Mexico, where they did have visas for us.

During this period, our parents came to see us every day, taking the ferry from Manhattan, trying to persuade Ellis Island officials that we – Alice, Walter, and I – would not stay in the U.S., but would move on to Mexico.

At night, Alice and I were separated from Walter, but during the day we were together in a huge common room. I heard the phrase “C’mon Ladies” from a black attendant whenever she wanted us to go somewhere. We were treated well, fed regularly, and taught to play Bingo. A ladies auxiliary also gave us sewing kits, as a gesture of kindness, allowing us to mend socks. For us, this was already an area of expertise, since we had learned how to do very fine darning – producing smooth, even stitches – in home economics classes in Prague, as well as from Grandmother.

And we were able to practice this skill in our Swiss school, where we were given large batches of socks to mend.

On Ellis Island, all kinds of people were being detained. I remember in particular a Japanese man in his 30s who *liked* staying there. He was a poet and had been there many months. He fell in love with 15-year-old, auburn-haired, blue-eyed Alice, showing his love by writing her haiku, a classic form of Japanese poetry.

Finally, the authorities believed my parents that all five of us would be moving to Mexico, so they allowed us to enter American soil on April 1<sup>st</sup>, in time to celebrate my father's 47<sup>th</sup> birthday the next day.

We stayed with my parents in a furnished apartment that they had been renting at Capital Hall on 87<sup>th</sup> Street, between Amsterdam and Columbus Avenue. It ended up that we stayed a few extra weeks – requiring an extension of our visas – because Mother became ill. Until our May departure for Mexico, Alice and I took Spanish and English lessons to give us an introduction to our next culture.

Father had been sharing a one-room office on the 13<sup>th</sup> floor – he was not superstitious – at 505 Fifth Avenue, the Bickford Building, with another stamp dealer who specialized in Dutch stamps. It was a corner room with a view onto 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, with the New York Public Library catty-corner across the street. The area was well known for its many stamp dealers.

## **Building a New Life in Mexico**

We finally left for Mexico in May 1940 on a small cruise ship, “The Monterey.” It stopped in Havana (where we saw a cigar factory) on its way to Vera

Cruz, Mexico. Both Havana and Vera Cruz were very hot and humid. By contrast, though, the climate in Mexico City was dry, without the oppressive humidity.

After we arrived in Mexico City by train from Vera Cruz, we stayed at a small hotel called the “Hipodrome” until our parents found an apartment to rent on the second floor of a two-apartment house located in “Lomas de Chapultepec” or “Las Lomas” (meaning “the hills”) for short. For the eight months we were in Mexico, we were the only tenants of the house, so it was very peaceful for us. In the back of the house, above the garage, there was a small apartment for the maid. Many Americans lived in this area. From the large terrace, we could see the extinct volcanoes of Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl (the sleeping woman).

Alice and I went to the American High School, even though our English was practically non-existent. It was not easy to communicate with the other students. But we were learning English and we were also learning Spanish. We had a private tutor, a Señora de Mues, a recently widowed mother of two children, who came twice a week to instruct us.

Still, for a young girl on the brink of womanhood, this was a challenging time. Most days, I sat alone outside at lunch. When a boy would make a joke – perhaps as a way of flirting – I didn’t understand. I appeared shy and serious then. So eventually, the boys stopped trying. I began to understand this when a new girl came to sit with me, until she realized that boys were not flocking around my table.

While we were in Mexico, the 1940 election was being held in the USA. Looking forward to moving to the U.S. eventually, Father was interested in American politics, strongly supporting Roosevelt. So he and I attended a formal election party, to which I wore my first formal gown – a wine red dress with sparkles. There, we listened to the radio for election results, learning happily that Franklin Delano Roosevelt had defeated William Wilkie.

Driving also became important for me when I turned 17, so our Mexican chauffeur taught me to drive our shift car. How I got my license, though, speaks to the realities of the time. Even though I was of legal age, I had to bribe an official to get the official document. On my first try, the chauffeur, who had accompanied me, made the gesture indicating that I had to give the official money. So the next time I came, I understood that a bribe was required.

Given our expectation that we would stay in Mexico for an extended period of time, our parents bought modern Mexican redwood furniture for the apartment. They socialized with other refugees from Hungary, Austria, and Germany.

Alice and I also met Mexicanized girls from those countries who became our friends. We were also introduced by some friends of our parents to a couple of Mexican boys who came to serenade us with guitars and songs, playing and singing for us outside. Not understanding the custom, we ignored them because it was so late at night. We learned later that we had deeply offended them by not inviting them inside for refreshments. My sense was that they were really attracted to Alice with her light color; my dark hair and eyes were nothing unusual. I blended right in with the neighbors.

To meet Mexican requirements that new immigrants invest in the country, Father had purchased a small farm near Cuautla. He found a German-Jewish farmer to work the farm for him. They were going to grow cucumbers and bought beehives for the bees to help fertilize them when they were in bloom. But to their dismay the bees preferred the flowers that a Japanese neighbor was growing, and so the cucumbers were a failure.

The climate in Mexico City was very pleasant with its altitude of 7,000 feet above sea level. As a result, indoor hobbies that had been popular in



Czechoslovakia, like stamp collecting, were non-existent and father could not make a living there with his stamps.

## **Getting Back to the United States**

So Father began considering what to do next. When the borders around Europe were closed, the quota for Czechs coming into the United States from other parts of the world opened up. Immediately, my parents applied for immigration visas to the U.S.

Father also ordered our first clutchless car, an Oldsmobile with a hydramatic (an early version of an automatic) drive, so he could drive himself. Our chauffeur brought us to Laredo, Texas, where the new car was to be delivered. We had to wait a whole week for it to arrive. We amused ourselves by eating in a Chinese restaurant (where I flirted with a Chinese-Mexican waiter!) and going to the movies where admission was just 25 cents. After the cream-colored car finally arrived, we took off for California, taking the Southern route to San Diego and Los Angeles. Father and I shared the driving, since Alice and Walter were too young, and mother's eyesight didn't allow her to drive.

In North Hollywood, we found an apartment on North Gramercy Place. Alice and I took a bus to a Los Angeles High school. We looked up a classmate from the Swiss school – Motte – who was now living in LA. Our parents also contacted friends from New York.

As in Mexico, Father tried to make contact with stamp collectors, but again the climate was not suitable for stamp collecting. So, after two months, our parents decided to go back to New York, where father already knew he could make a living. We timed our trip to coincide with our Easter vacation. Taking Route 40 east, we stopped to see the Grand Canyon, Painted Desert, and Hoover Dam. We also

stopped in Cincinnati, Ohio, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and Philadelphia to see some of father's philatelic friends.

In Philadelphia, we visited an old Austrian gentleman, Mr. Windner, who had trunkfuls of Austrian stamps that he wanted to cash in. So father bought them all. They were unsorted, with valuable ones mixed in with ordinary ones. We knew it would be a big job to get them organized.

This whole cross country trip took just ten hurried days, because we wanted to be back in New York in time for school to reopen after the Easter holidays. When we arrived, though, we discovered that their break had just started – they were on a different schedule than Los Angeles!

For the remainder of the term, Alice and I went to Julia Richman High School in Manhattan. Again, we stayed at the furnished apartment at Capitol Hall, until our parents found an unfurnished apartment (175-06 Devonshire Road) in Jamaica Estates in Queens. It was a lovely neighborhood, but it was a long commute for Father; we lived close to the last stop on the E train at 169<sup>th</sup> Street and he had to make his way all the way to 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Walter was Bar Mitzvahed in the spring of 1942 at the local congregation in Jamaica Estates that our family had joined. It was a simple celebration with just the immediate family attending.

Alice and I finished our last year of high school at Jamaica High, graduating together in 1942. Our English and Spanish teachers at Jamaica High School were very proud of us, because we excelled in our English grammar and spelling and conversational Spanish, when compared with other students

Even though Alice and I had been two years apart in Prague and Switzerland, we finished high school at the same time – with Alice finishing a year ahead of

schedule and I a year behind. Because I wanted to improve my knowledge of English, American history, and civics, I opted to stay longer.

## **Entering the World of Work**

My high school art teacher, Mrs. Mann, was very encouraging and gave me an award. In the summer of 1941, during vacation, I took a textile design course at the Traphagan School of Fashion. I continued that on Saturdays during the school year. I won a prize for a handkerchief design; the school bought it for reproduction.

My first job was painting figurines. There were several girls doing this; one would paint the body, the next one the hair, then the face, etc., in assembly-line fashion. Even though they were mass-produced, the public liked these pieces because they were “hand-painted.” I earned \$15 a week minus deductions.

In the fall of 1942, I found a job in the textile design field, working for Marcel. He had three permanent designers, and then he hired what turned out to be a couple of temporary designers for the busy season. I was one of those. We had to figure out the repeat for the designs. When the season was over in December, he let us go.

Then in January, Mother saw an ad in the *New York Times*: the U.S. government was giving free courses in mechanical drawing and lettering. I signed up and after taking a six-week course, I obtained a job in the spring of 1943 as a draftsman at Leitz Company (known for the Leica camera) on Fifth Avenue, between 56<sup>th</sup> and 57<sup>th</sup> Street, for \$35 a week. That was pretty good starting pay. Later it was increased to \$40. (To put that in context, in those years the subway cost a nickel and you could get a cream cheese and nut sandwich for 15 cents or a tuna sandwich for 25 cents at Chock Full o’Nuts.)

My job involved making detail, assembly, and cross-section drawings of scientific instruments, taking measurements with a micrometer, and other precise activities. It was interesting work. The company was under contract with the U.S. government for the war effort. There were three other female junior draftsmen, a draftsman and an engineer, a Mr. Hess. Our supervisor, he was a very nice quiet, thin, tall man who unfortunately later died of a brain tumor.

Five months later, in the fall of 1944, I began night school four times a week at Cooper Union, having passed the entrance exam on my second try. I had failed the first try, two years before, because my English comprehension was not good enough. Ultimately, though, I graduated twice from Cooper Union. The first time, in 1948, I got a certificate in Fine Arts during the years when night school graduates weren't given BAs. Later, when that policy was changed – and after having taken additional courses, earning credits for both German and Spanish language, as well as for life experience – I was granted a Bachelor's degree in 1981.

Mr. Hess let me adjust my work schedule so that I could start an hour later at 10 am, and stay an hour later until 6 pm. That worked out fine, because I could grab a bite to eat before class, which started at 7 pm and lasted until 10 pm.

My teachers included – among others – painters Byron Thomas and Morris Kantor, sculptor John Hovanes, and a designer, Ms. Schultz. In second year painting, my “Seated Man” won an award.

Our parents were Zionists. They were for the creation of a Jewish State. So, following in their footsteps, Alice and I joined the Young Zionist Organization (YZO) in New York. At the beginning of March 1948, when I was already engaged to Ira, the YZO sponsored a Purim ball. There was a Queen Esther beauty contest that I won by popular vote. A handsome young Mr. Manischewitz crowned me and gave me a rhinestone lapel watch. I was in the last year at Cooper Union at that

time, and when I attended the next class, to my surprise, I was hailed as a celebrity. My photo with Mr. Manischewitz had been in the *Daily News*!

In the summer of 1943, we moved to Manhattan because the commute for Father had become too much. Our apartment was on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor of 900 West End Avenue, on the corner of 104<sup>th</sup> Street.

I stayed with Leitz for two years. Then in the spring of 1945, Father needed someone reliable in his office, so he hired me for \$70 a week. By this time, he had the office to himself. Father typed his own letters, so I did not do primarily secretarial jobs, although I did put postage on the letters and answered the phones. Mostly, though, I sorted stamps, arranged collections, did some illustrations of stamps, etc. When there was an exhibit, I would help man the booth. My hours were easy – from 10:30 am to 5:30 pm. Father had the radio tuned to WQXR, so we listened to classical music while we worked.

On March 28, 1948, I married my husband, Ira, but continued to work for Father through most of December 1948. One month later, in January of 1949, I gave birth to my son Ralph.

My siblings took different paths. Alice went to business school, becoming a Spanish-English secretary. One of her jobs was with the Bank of America. She never married, living in San Francisco from the mid-1950s until her death in 1983. Like me, Alice was interested in the arts. In her spare time, she did some painting, enameling, and sculpture as a hobby. I have some of her work in my home. As she got older, it was hard for her to keep a job once she contracted multiple sclerosis, but she needed a source of income. So she started a language school teaching Spanish, German, and Czech to Americans and English to foreigners. A number of her students were operatic singers who had to learn another language, typically German.

Walter started college in Boulder, Colorado and graduated from Madison, Wisconsin. A mathematician, he worked for a computer company, and then started his own business in analogue computers. In 1961, he married Lila Popper, originally a ballet dancer, and lived and worked in Princeton, New Jersey. Walter died in 1974. Later, Lila left dancing and became the office manager for her daughter, who became a plastic surgeon.

### **After V-E Day: Finding Out Who Lived, Who Died**

I remember V-E Day – May 8, 1945 – when the war in Europe ended. We were in the office and had a good view on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. People threw streamers and rolls of toilet paper out the window; there was a lot of jubilation.

Until December 7, 1941, we had been in touch with our relatives. So we knew that in August of 1941, Grandmother Hermine had died. Their letters were censored, though, so we had to read between the lines. We knew that things were getting worse for the Jews. They lost their jobs, were not allowed in public places like movies and restaurants, etc. They desperately wanted to get out. My parents tried to get them visas to South American countries, but it was too late. The borders closed and no one could leave.

We did not hear from them again until late in the spring of 1945. By then we had read the news reports about the concentration camps, gas chambers, etc. But when Pepi's letter arrived and Mother told us what became of my aunt Lotte, her husband Robert, and my aunt Sophie and uncle Alois, we were deeply shocked. We stood in the big anteroom and cried together.

Lotte and Robert, we learned, were among the first to be deported in the summer of 1942, and no one knows how they perished. Sophie and her husband

Otto came to Auschwitz together on November 12, 1944. There they were separated, with Otto wanting desperately to go with his wife; his friends had to drag him with them. Otto survived to tell the story. Sophie went to the gas chamber. Alois was on a death march. A friend of the family witnessed him being shot when he could not go on anymore. Pepi and Hede survived. They were married to Christian men, who would not divorce their Jewish spouses as the Nuremberg law required, thus providing temporary protection for their wives. In the last year of the war, they ended up in Theresienstadt, a transit camp used to hold Jews en route to extermination camps like Auschwitz. Unlike in the extermination camps, the Jewish community in Theresienstadt had self-government, but thousands still died there due to illness and malnutrition. For many, this was a temporary stop, en route to Auschwitz in the east.

Pepi, who was half blind, was put in charge of the blind facility at Theresienstadt. After about four months there, Pepi and Hede were liberated. The Christian paternal grandmother who was living with the family took care of the children, but Anča (Pepi's oldest daughter) was placed in a hospital for safekeeping, pretending to have tuberculosis.

### **The Survivors Nourish Our Family Tree**

The Christian husbands were punished for not having divorced their Jewish wives; they were sent to forced labor camps. Luckily, they survived. So, although we lost several dear relatives in the war, our family continued to grow. Aunt Pepi gave birth to two children before the war, Anča (b. 1934) and Pepik (b. 1941). Then, after her husband, Josef Pallas, came back, they had two more children, Jirka (b. 1949) and Evženka (b. 1952). Most of our friends and other relatives, however, lost their lives, among them Mr. Conti from Milan, Italy.

Jirka eventually emigrated with his family to Sweden because of political pressure. When Prague was under Communist rule, life was good for Jirka – he had a good job and a family, with one son, Hynek (b. 1975), and a common-law wife until he signed a petition seeking greater human rights. This “political” act caused him to lose his job and he found himself barred from any work – even a job so simple as dishwashing. The authorities were without compassion, telling him that if he didn’t like his lot, he could leave. They gave him the choice of going to Sweden or Austria; he chose Sweden. And although he could have returned to Prague when the Communists left, he had become very fond of Sweden, where he was treated well. Both he and his wife went to college there, after which he started a computer business. They also gave birth to a daughter, Anička, born in Sweden in 1977. Hynek became a writer.

Aunt Hede went with her daughter, Edith (b. 1931), to Israel. Edith stayed there, but Hede returned to Prague, unable to get accustomed to the hot Israeli climate. Edith married a Polish Jewish survivor, Jacob Seligfeld. They had a daughter, Miriam, born in 1966.

In April 1985, when Ira and I went to Israel, we saw Edith and met her family. Miriam was 19 and in the army. Since then, Miriam married a North African Jew, Yoel Ovadia, in Israel and gave birth to at least three children, including twin boys, Peleg and Almog. (In Hebrew, “peleg” means a small river; “almog” means coral.)

At this writing, the Lieben descendents live in various countries, including Israel, Czech Republic, Sweden, and United States.

On Father’s side, there are no living Brunner relatives with a direct bloodline, since his father, Herman, passed away in January 1938. Walter’s adopted son, however, carries on the family name. Father did have first cousins on his mother’s



side, the Adlers. There were three sisters: Elsa Alt, Olga Geiger, and Hedwig Hess. Elsa and Olga lived in Vienna, Austria and managed to get out after “the Anschluss” – the political takeover of Austria by Germany, achieved through annexation by Adolf Hitler – in March of 1938 and came to New York with their families.

Elsa had two sons, Fred (b. 1912) and Franz (b. 1911). Fred married Hansi, a pianist and composer of children’s music. In fact, I illustrated a couple of her music books. Fred and Hansi, who lived in the Washington area, did not have children; they are both now gone.

Franz lives with his second wife, Annice, in New York City. He had come to the United States with his first wife, Alice Modern, who died in 1969. Alice and Franz had two children together, Theresa Alt (b. 1943) who lives in Ithaca, New York and James (b. 1946) who married Elaine Fiore and lives in Marblehead, Massachusetts. James and Elaine have two children: Rachel (b. 1974) and Adam (b. 1978). Franz’s hobby is playing the violin with chamber music ensembles. At this writing, Franz must be 96 years old and is still going strong.

Olga (b. 1893) and her husband, Bernhard, had a daughter Ruth (b. 1923), a concert pianist who performed in England. She lives in New York, giving lessons and performing.

Hedwig, who lived in Moravia, perished, but she was able to send her only daughter, Maria, to England. Maria then went with the British army to Israel and eventually arrived in New York after the war in 1946. She married Walter Grimes and they had three children – Larry, Cathy, and Judy – all of whom are now married and have their own families. Walter and Maria brought up their family in Falls Church, Virginia. Maria worked in Washington, DC for the Library of Congress. Maria died in 1986.

There were other first cousins in the Adler family, including the Färbers. See the family photograph from 1905. Sadly, the descendants of those aunts, uncles, and cousins all perished.

As of 2006, the descendants of this side of the family live in the United States, with Walter's adopted son, Mark (b. 1960), a ski instructor and builder, living in Colorado, and his daughter, Eugenie (b. 1963), a plastic surgeon, married to Paul Egan. They have twin daughters, Mariel and Olivia, (b. 2001) living in Lawrenceville, near Princeton, New Jersey. Mark married Karen Seater.

As for my own family, Ira was a chemical engineer working for the pharmaceutical company Merck in Rahway, New Jersey when I first met him, though he served most of his life for the U.S. government. Initially, he was in the army, then received a civilian honor – the “Decoration for Meritorious Civil Service” award – in 1980 upon his retirement. Not one to be idle even then, Ira became a working farmer in West Virginia. He passed away in September 1998.

We raised four sons in Maryland: Ralph (b. January 20, 1949), Eugene (b. March 4, 1953), Jonathan (b. December 21, 1955) and Evan (b. October 7, 1960). Ralph, a businessman, married Elly Watrous in 1973. There are two children from this marriage. Joshua (b. September 3, 1976) is an artist, a serious painter, and Elizabeth Tischbe (b. September 30, 1985) is an artist and writer. Ralph married Christine Price in 2002; they live in Frederick, Maryland.

Eugene married Sheila Pratt in 1980. Andrew, called Andy, (b. April 16, 1981) was the product of this short-lived marriage. He is an artist and musician. Then Eugene married Mary Lou Weed in 1990; there were no children from this marriage, but Mary Lou had two teenagers from a previous marriage. Finally, in 2003, Eugene married Sarah Dvulichanska (b. January 1974) from Lugansk, Ukraine. They have a daughter, Rivka, born December 29, 2005. Eugene, first a

farm manager, then a financial advisor for American Express, lives and works in West Virginia.

Unfortunately, Jonathan and Evan didn't quite make it into adulthood. Jonathan, a very talented boy, died of aplastic anemia just short of his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday in December 1973. Evan, a very lovable child, became mentally ill and ended his life when not quite 20 years old, in September 1980. Our marriage survived these tragedies.

### **Final Note**

Our heritage as Jews has been a driving force in our lives, from our very earliest moments. In the Prague public school, for example, twice a week for one hour, students were separated into Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish groups with corresponding instructors. We had Rabbi Tobias Jacobowitch.

During the Nazi regime, he was forced to catalogue the robbed synagogue treasures of the "Extinct Race" for the Jewish Museum in Prague. Once the job was done, he was also sent to Auschwitz.

Mother, more traditionally religious than Father, taught us the Sh'ma and took us to high holiday services, where the women sat in the balcony. We celebrated Chanukah. In Prague, I remember going to community Seders. We ate matzah at home during Passover. Yet we did not keep kosher; and, in fact, I didn't even know what that meant until we moved to the United States. Later, I learned that for Sunday dinners, Mother had cooked goose – rather than the roast pork we typically ate – whenever my grandmother, who did keep kosher, came to visit.

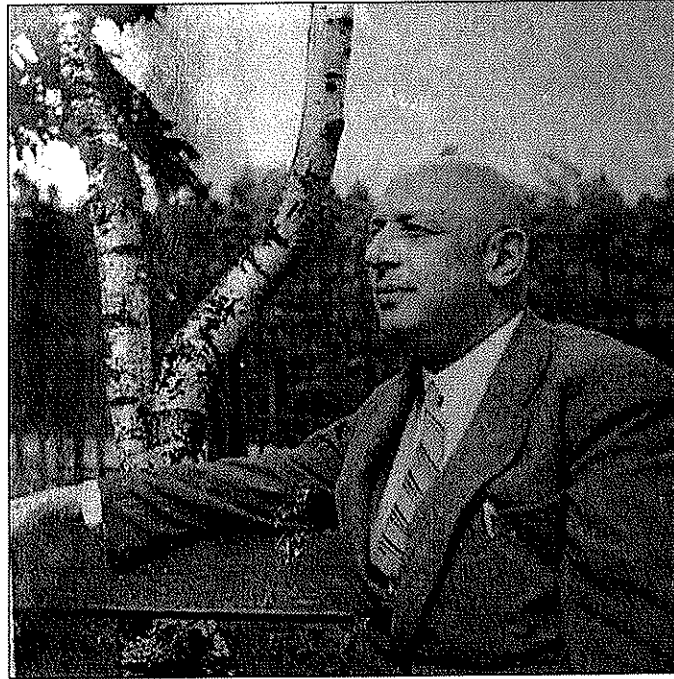
In New York, Mother made seders, inviting Father's cousins, the Geigers, and Maria Hess (later Grimes), with Uncle Bernard (a professor of Near Eastern Languages and Sanskrit) rattling off the Hebrew. Father felt deeply Jewish, but not in a religious way. For example, when asked what nationality he was, he would say, "I'm a Jew with Czechoslovak citizenship." Ultimately, he changed his response to "I'm a Jew with American citizenship."

When Alice, Walter, and I were in the Protestant-oriented school in Switzerland, Father wrote us letters about what it meant to him to be a Jew and encouraged us to celebrate Chanukah together with the few other Jewish students. I still have those meaningful letters and have been translating them from German into English.

I wrote this memoir for several reasons. One, an insight to the comfortable life we had lived in democratic Czechoslovakia. Two, to show my gratitude to my parents who were courageous to leave this life suddenly for an uncertain future when there was a threat from without. Three, to commemorate my dear aunts and uncles who had contributed so much to our own childhood happiness, who paid the ultimate price under the Nazis. Four, to show the adjustments the family had to make in our moves. Five, to show future generations where part of their heritage came from. And six, had it not been for these fortuitous circumstances, we would not be in existence.

By this time, I am the only one of my close family to remember that era, so I feel it's up to me to tell the story.

# FAMILY PHOTO ALBUM



My parents, Felix Brunner and  
Eugenie Lieben Brunner, 1934





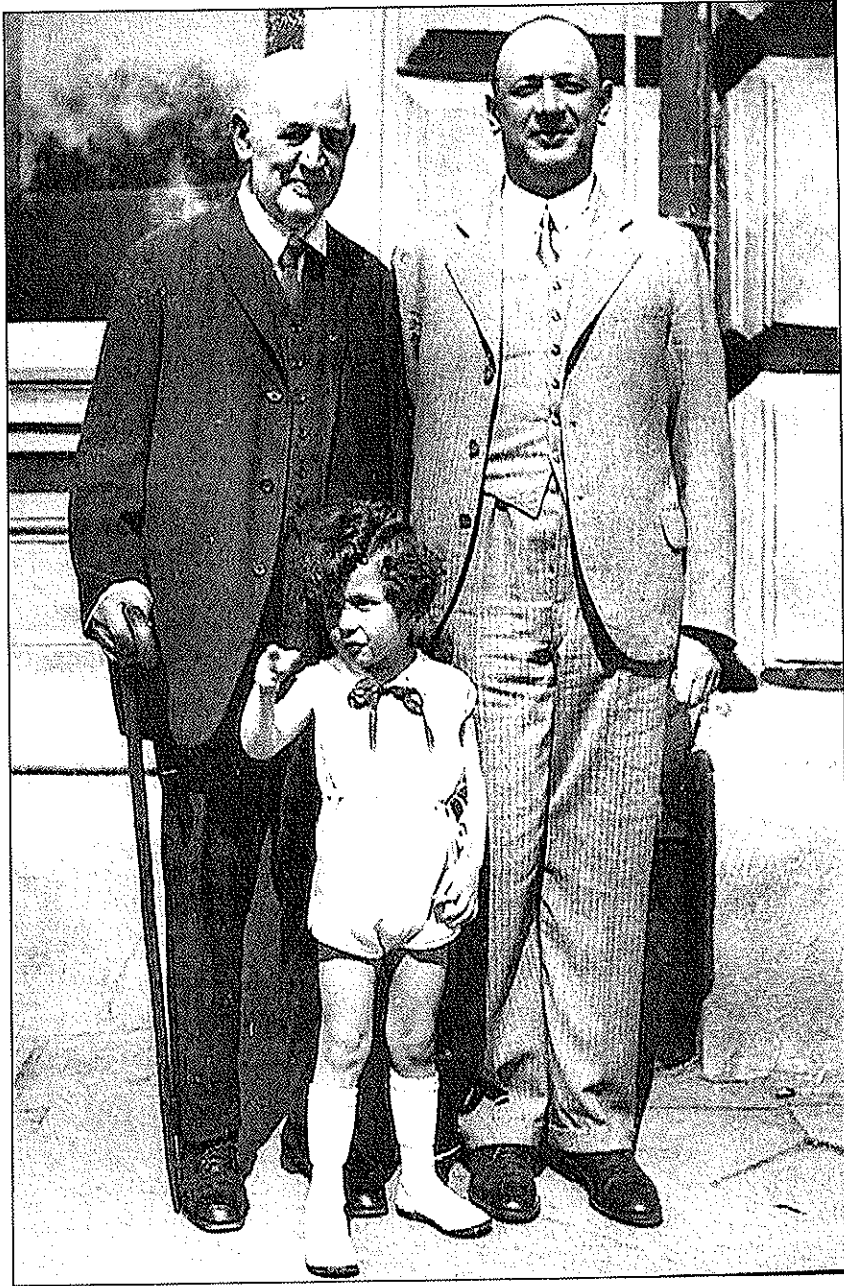
Eugenie Lieben Brunner with children (left to right):  
Paula, Walter and Alice, 1932



My grandmother, Hermine Lieben, 1934

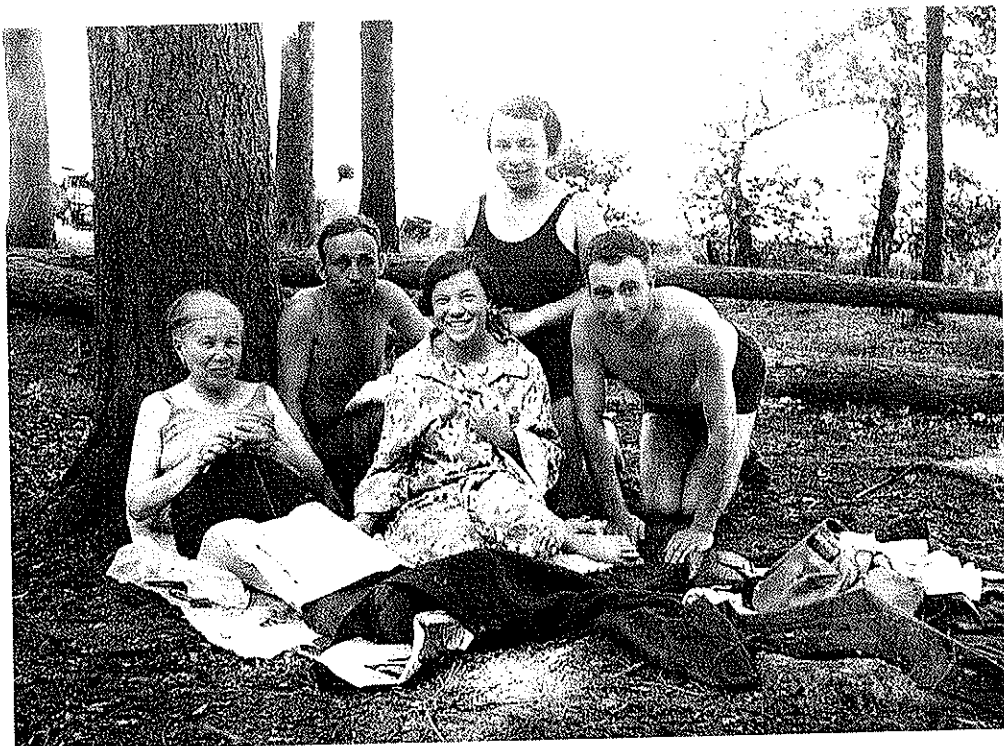


My beloved Aunt Lotte  
(Lieben Fröhlich)

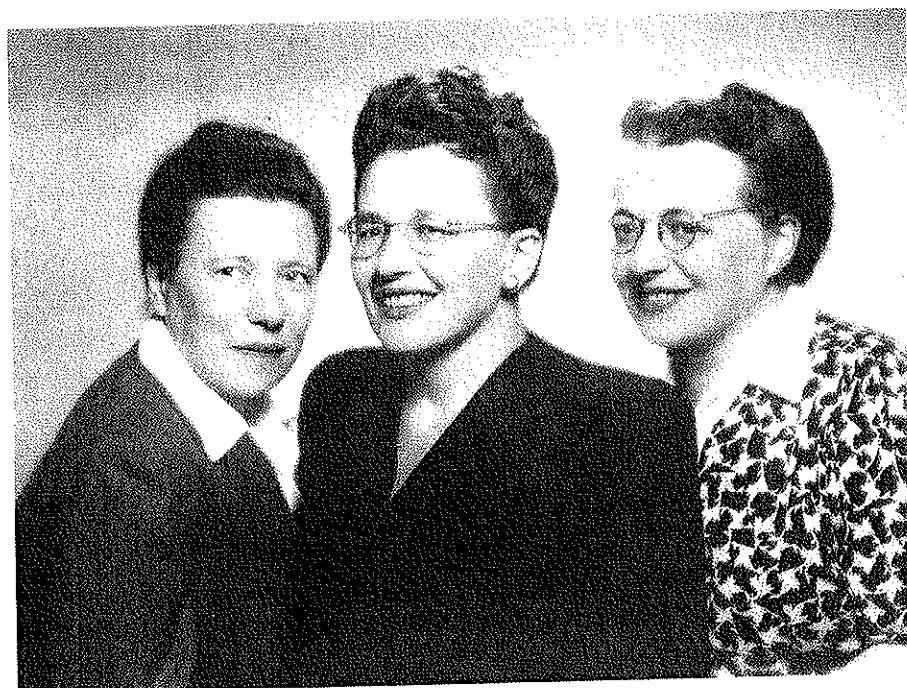


My grandfather, Herman Brunner, with my father, Felix, and my brother, Walter, 1932





The family just before the war.  
L to r: Grandmother Hermine, Robert Froehlich,  
Sophie, Lotte and Otto 1939



My mother and aunts: reunion in Prague  
l. to r. Hedwig, Eugenie and Josephine 1948



My grandfather, Rudolf Lieben,  
husband of Hermine c. 1915



My grandmother, Hermine Fuchs Lieben, holding  
baby Sophie, with Eugenie Lieben Brunner to her left  
and Hede Lieben Vokurka to the right c. 1906



Mother and Sisters Lieben, 1918

l to r: Hedwig (Hede), Sophie, Charlotte (Lotte), Eugenie (Egi),  
Josephine (Pepi)



On the Occasion of Salomon Adler's 75<sup>th</sup> Birthday, 1905

*Top row (l. to r.):* Samuel (husband of Paula Adler), Helene Färber (née Adler), Pavel, Siegmund, Ernst, Phillipp Schreier, Hermann Brunner (my grandfather), [Grandmother Flora Brunner, née Adler, is not pictured]

*Seated (l. to r.):* Clara, Leopold, Great grandparents Henriette (née Robinek) and Salomon Adler, Felix Brunner, Katherine Schreier (née Adler), Elsa Schreier (married an Alt), Hedwig Schreier (married a Hess)

*On floor (l. to r.):* Camilla Brunner, Victor Adler, Olga Schreier (married Bernhard Geiger)

