

Genealogy: My Game Changer

by Carole Garbuny Vogel

In February 2020, just before the coronavirus scuttled world travel, I found myself in a sheep pasture in Whangapoua, New Zealand, attending a family wedding. Four decades ago, I never imagined that I had cousins in New Zealand or elsewhere outside of the United States, Israel, and Austria. I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1951 and for the first 28 years of my life I thought I was related to fewer than 50 people on the planet. I knew little about my parents' and grandparents' lives in Europe.

Lack of curiosity was not the problem. I was born to be a family historian in the same way that my husband is hard-wired to be an engineer and Itzhak Perlman was destined to become a violinist. But I came from a family of survivors who were loath to discuss the past. They met my questions with silence or terse answers. "We are forward-looking people," became the refrain. "We don't look back."

Not looking back made it possible for the older generations to live in the present but rendered me rootless. As I

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came of age, my curiosity about the past persisted. I thought it a travesty that I didn't even know the names of my paternal grandparents' siblings and parents, or where the families had lived.

One particularly ugly interchange stands out. I was in New York City visiting my widowed paternal grandfather Efim Garbuny (1880–1987), whom I later learned was from Vitebsk, Russia. My occasional probing into his background had always been rebuffed by angry tones but now I was a 21-year-old college girl and felt entitled to know more. On the living room wall above his couch hung a large, sepia-toned photograph of Grandpa's family of origin. There was no doubt in my mind that this was a portrait of my grandfather as a young man standing with his three brothers and three sisters. Front and center were his seated parents.

Who are these people?" I asked.

"Nobody you know," he answered gruffly in his thick Russian accent.

"They're your parents and siblings," I said. "What are their names?"

"I don't know their names." He lied.

"Nobody forgets the names of their parents, sisters, and brothers," I countered. "I have the right to know the names of the people in MY family."

"They are not YOUR family," Grandpa roared, and that was the end of the discussion and any feeling of affection that I had held for my grandfather.



2020 family wedding in a New Zealand sheep pasture

By 1979, when I had already been married for six years, and pregnant with Joshua, my firstborn, my maternal grandmother, Dr. Fanny Berlin Lowy (1895–1993), finally softened her own stance. Bits and pieces of her past came alive in the form of long stories and short anecdotes of her childhood in Lodz, Russia (now Poland) and medical studies in Moscow. Until then my family identity had been one of pain and loss and it felt strange and wonderful to leap over the abyss of the Shoah and glimpse a family full of vitality. Grandma gave me a box of photographs that not been opened in decades. It was clear that she was not comfortable discussing the contents and most of the photos were unlabeled.

However, she provided me with the names and addresses of distant family members in New York and Israel. Thus began in earnest a pursuit of family history that has lasted forty years and counting, spanned six continents, and involved the exchange of thousands of letters, emails, messages, and phone calls. I encountered many obstacles along the way—foremost being the reluctance of survivors to revisit the past. But there was also the challenge of finding and deciphering old letters, documents, and records in eleven different languages. With the help of these distant relatives, I identified most of the people in Grandma's old photos and obtained translations of many of the letters and documents.

By the time Kate, my younger child, was born in 1981, my father had opened up about his experiences as a university student in Nazi Berlin. His story, "In the Clutches of the SS," appeared in *We Shall Not Forget: Memories of the Holocaust*. This was a 500-page book edited by me and published by Temple Isaiah in Lexington, Massachusetts. It showed the impact of the Shoah within one American Jewish congregation and was written by Holocaust survivors and the sons and daughters of survivors.

Dad and I kept the book's publication secret from my mother. Mom was so vehemently opposed to me probing into her family's Holocaust history that she had threatened to sue me if I ever published anything about it. Her threat had not

deterred me. I included her parents' stories in the book, which contained a family portrait with her in it, photographed in New York City's Central Park shortly after the family reached the American shore in 1939. I figured that since the book had been privately published in New England with a print run of 2,000, the chances of Mom in suburban Pittsburgh finding out about it were slim. Dad kept his copy underneath his side of the bed where Mom never looked.

Mom never found Dad's copy but she found out about the book. A friend had taken a short course on the Holocaust in Florida and *We Shall Not Forget* served as the textbook. What were the chances? The friend called Mom to congratulate her. Livid, Mom didn't speak to me for a year. Life went on.

Ten years passed and my mother finally began to appreciate my research. She enjoyed hearing what had happened to her cousins who had survived. One of them was her second cousin Greta Löwy Clark who had immigrated illegally to Mandate Palestine and in 1943 married George Clark, a British Merchant Navy first officer. After the British left Palestine, the couple settled in Cyprus where George worked as a harbor pilot. In 1960, after Cyprus gained its independence from Britain, George and Greta moved to Scarborough, England, George's hometown, with their four sons and one daughter.

I tracked Greta Clark down in the 1990s. I knew that she had spent childhood holidays in Gloggnitz, Austria in the same multi-family home that my mother had frequently visited. Their grandfathers were brothers. I introduced myself to Greta in a letter and explained that my mother refused to talk about the Löwy family in Austria and I was hoping that Greta could answer some questions. What I didn't know was that Greta had refused to speak about her past with her own children but she was willing to engage with me. Over several years we developed a wonderful correspondence and she came to visit me in America. I convinced Greta to share her experiences and she surprised her children by presenting them with a manuscript with her life story.

Now, her kids were curious—who was this woman who had cracked Greta where they couldn't. Letters started to arrive from England, Australia, and New Zealand—the places where her brood had settled. Soon these British strangers began to feel like family. In 2005, I met three of my Clark cousins when they came to Baden, a spa town about an hour from Vienna. The occasion was the rededication of the Baden synagogue, a temple that my great-great-grandfather Jakob Kohn had helped to found in 1872.

Jakob Kohn was the father of my great-grand-aunt Gisa Kohn Dollinger. Though age 103, Gisa decided to make the trip from New York City. Her presence inspired many other relatives to come from as far away as Australia and Israel. I was dumbfounded when my mother as well as my sisters and their husbands, and a niece and nephew decided to attend. Gisa gave us an unforgettable tour of Baden, steeped in family history. She also pointed out all the Jewish-owned homes and businesses, and identified the homes and businesses

owned by Nazis. She provided a bone-chilling description of Kristallnacht, identifying victims and perpetrators, and the ultimate fate of the Jews. She then repeated most of it in German in an interview for Austrian television.

Despite her participation in the Baden trip, Mom still refused to discuss her own life during the Nazi regime. However, in June 2008 everything changed. Mom was diagnosed with third-stage breast cancer and had just been released from the hospital following a mastectomy. She was extremely depressed as she had watched two of her closest friends die of the same disease and she saw only pain and suffering in her own future. Prior to her cancer diagnosis, Mom had planned to throw a big party to celebrate her 85th birthday later in the year. Now she was more in the mood to discuss funeral arrangements.

On her return home from the hospital, she found an invitation from her alma mater Radetzkysschule in Vienna sitting on the coffee table. It was for a memorial to pay tribute to the Jewish students and teachers from the school who were victims of the barbaric acts during the Nazi era. Heinz Fischer, the president of Austria would be the keynote speaker. This was the apology my mother had been waiting for all her adult life and it was scheduled for November 13, 2008, her 85th birthday. Vivian, who was taking care of Mom, reported what happened next:

Mom's first reaction was, "Pah! About time!" Then she paused. "Only 70 years too late." She glanced at the invitation again. "But it's on my birthday, I might as well go." I read the letter and said, "Well, if you don't mind, I'll go with you." Later that day, I told my husband, Tom, about the invitation. He said he would like to go too and I relayed this information to Mom. The next day, Mom said, "I'd like all my daughters to come with me. And their husbands too of course." A day later she added, "And I want all my grandchildren to come with me."

So began the planning for one of the most momentous journeys our family has ever undertaken. Mom cashed in an under-performing fund to pay for plane fare and lodging. Our Aunt Nina decided to join us. Inge and Ulrich, good friends from Germany, also decided to join us. Our cousin Irene lives in Vienna—she was born there after her father (our mother's brother George) returned to Vienna in 1947. Irene warned us that her health was poor and she was not likely to have the energy to participate in our Vienna visit. But Irene surprised us—and possibly herself. Not only did she attend the ceremony, but she and her husband hosted a gala birthday dinner for Mom at a Chinese restaurant owned by their friends.

About a month before the ceremony, Renate Mercsantis, one of the dedicated teachers from Radetzkysschule and a principal organizer of the event, asked my mother if she would like to speak at the gathering. My sisters and I were astounded when Litty agreed. Mom has never been forthcoming about her experiences after the Nazis marched into Austria. Not only had Mom never been forthcoming about her suffering but she was not a natural-born wordsmith and

she was an introvert. How could she ever write about emotionally laden events and deliver the words to an audience of 500 people?

I knew where this was heading and it was going to fall in my lap at the last minute when Mom would call and demand that I write the speech for her. Thus, I began my research. On April 28, 1938, about six weeks after the Anschluss when the Nazis marched into Austria, all Jewish students were expelled from their schools and reassigned to *Jüdische Samschulen*, segregated Jewish schools. At Radetzkysschule, eight Jewish teachers and 121 Jewish students were expelled. Ironically, the school had been designated a Jew school in practice—and the Christian students were the ones who had to leave. My mother returned the next day to the same familiar building with her fellow Jewish students but with 160 new Jewish classmates and a very different set of administrators and teachers.

Mom decided not to write about her experiences within the segregated school. She figured that other returning students would cover this in panel discussions in the three-day school program that was part of the commemoration. In truth, the school experiences had been so terrifying that she had blocked them from her memory and couldn't retrieve them. Instead, she wanted to describe what happened outside of school during this period. I prompted her with events that I had researched, such as Jews being forced to scrub sidewalks, and these stimulated her own memories. It took three weeks of back-and-forth exchanges to prepare the speech.

Mom delivered the speech flawlessly. By the time she finished, many of the listeners were in tears and she received a sustained standing ovation. At the end of the program, a 5 by 8-foot commemoration plaque was unveiled with the names of all the Jewish students and teachers inscribed on it. On the plaque there was no separation between those who managed to escape and rekindle their lives from those who had been killed or those who had survived the horrors of concentration camps. For my mother this was worth more than the words of apology from the Austrian president. It was a public testament to her suffering. Here is the speech she gave:

* * * * *

The Goodbyes that Never Go Away

by Melitta Löwy Garbuny

My teachers from long ago would be extremely surprised to see me representing the students of Radetzky Realgymnasium today. I was a good student but I was also the class troublemaker along with my friends Magda Dorn and Blanka Apfelbaum. One day Magda and I decided that the school dress code was not fashionable enough for us. We wanted to look like beautiful young women, not like babies. So, we dressed up in fancy clothes and put on silk stockings and lipstick. Our friends were impressed, but the headmaster was not. Silk stockings and lipstick were strictly forbidden. He sent us home and told us to come back when we were properly attired.

Blanka's father owned a novelty store and one of the items he sold was squirt guns. Blanka gave me one of the guns. In

French class, Blanka sat in the first row and I sat directly behind her. While the teacher was writing on the board, I had the sudden impulse to squirt Blanka. In those days we wrote with fountain pens that we filled with ink and each of us had an inkbottle at our desks. So, I filled the squirt gun with ink and aimed it at the back of Blanka's head. Unfortunately, at that moment, Blanka bent over to pick something off the floor. Instead of hitting my friend, I squirted ink on the French teacher.

My father was called to the school and informed that he was to take me home and I was never to come back. I was extremely scared. The school was my life. What would I do if I were banished? My father was Dr. Moriz Löwy, a well-known pediatrician in the second district, and extremely charming. He pleaded with the headmaster to give me another chance and I was allowed to return after a few days' suspension. My friends were greatly relieved to have me back.

Today, when you look at photographs of my classmates and me, you see us in black and white. We are motionless, frozen in time. Not only do we lack color, movement, and sound, but we are dressed in old-fashioned clothes and out-of-date hairstyles. But we were colorful, noisy, and full of life. We had hopes, dreams, and ambitions just like all of you students here, sitting in the room that we once filled. We had such great potential.

Everything changed with the Anschluss. I was 14 years old in March 1938 when the Nazis took over Austria and marched into Vienna. I stood on the sidewalk and watched the parade. I witnessed the goose-stepping Nazi soldiers, the armored tanks and the German warplanes flying overhead. Large swastika-emblazoned flags were everywhere. I knew that nothing would ever be the same again but I never imagined how terrible life would become for the Jews of Austria.

I have rarely talked about these times with my family. I became very angry with one of my daughters when she decided to write the family history. I was afraid that she would portray me as a victim. I did not want to think of myself as a victim. I was one of the lucky ones. I got a chance to start over in America.

I wanted to separate myself from the events of the Holocaust. So, I told my daughter that my immigration experience was not a hardship for me. I viewed it as an adventure. I claimed that mixing the story of my immigration with the subsequent horrors of the Holocaust belittled the memory of Nazi victims. The truth is that I felt guilty for having survived. I did not want to acknowledge even to myself that I had suffered under the Nazis. I felt that admitting any pain somehow diminished the suffering that others had experienced.

The arrests of prominent Jews began immediately after the Anschluss. My parents knew it was just a matter of time before Nazis would show up at our home on Taborstrasse and Karmeliterplatz. My parents fled the house and went into hiding. Soon after they departed there was a terrible pound-

ing on the door. Thugs in brown shirts with swastika armbands on their sleeves demanded that I fetch a pail of water and a toothbrush. I cannot describe to you the humiliation of being 14 years old and forced to scrub the sidewalk. I cannot remember the details of what happened next because it is too painful.

Likely some neighbors from my building and other local residents looked on. Perhaps they jeered me and called me a dirty Jew. I don't know whether I was kicked or spat upon. I do know that no one came to my rescue. It is a terrible thing to be a small, powerless teenager. The very policemen who should have been my protectors were the ones in charge of my humiliation.

It is even worse to see your parents and all your adult relatives powerless in the face of tyranny. With each passing day the terror in Vienna increased. No Jew was safe anywhere—not in their home, not in the street. You could be riding a streetcar and rounded up. Gangs of brown-shirted thugs roamed the streets. Everywhere Jews were harassed.

My mother, my father, my grandmother, my aunts and uncles, my parents' friends, the parents of my friends, all the adults in my life were afraid. Each time they stepped out on the street they feared they would be seized in a roundup. They worried that if they stayed at home they would be arrested and sent to a concentration camp. The adults could not protect themselves. How could they offer security to their children who were old enough to see what was happening?

The solid ground I stood on had turned to quicksand. My sense of safety was torn from me and to this day I have never regained it. There is always the sense that I can lose everything precious to me in the blink of an eye.

Radetzky Realgymnasium, like the rest of Vienna, had changed. Nazi flags and banners were everywhere. The school had been about 60 percent Jewish. By May 1938 it had been designated an all-Jewish school and its Christian students transferred to Jew-free schools. My surviving classmates who are here today will describe for you tomorrow in classroom visits and a panel discussion their experiences in the school after the Anschluss.

My Jewish friends and I could not understand the intensity of the hatred directed at us. We shared stories of neighbors and acquaintances turning against us, as well as stories of good friends and neighbors who did what they could to help. Most hurtful, however, was the reaction of many former friends and acquaintances. These people averted their eyes when we passed them in the streets. Before the Anschluss they would have given us a friendly greeting. Now they acted as if we were invisible. We thought these people were good. How could they pretend that we did not exist? Why did they choose to go along with the evil enveloping our nation?

Some of my classmates reported the appearance of storm troopers and SS men at their doors. The Nazis searched their homes looking for money, jewelry, important papers. They arrested the fathers. My friend Magda Dorn was terribly upset because her father had been taken to a concentration camp. She didn't know if she would ever see him again.



Author's mother at age 14 on a class ski trip in 1938 shortly before the Anschluss.

The Nazis systematically stripped Jewish families of their assets and froze their bank accounts. Panic set in. Where would the money come from for food and rent? What did the future hold for the children? We all knew that we had to leave our country.

My uncle lived in Paris so my parents decided to go to France. I was in charge of getting the official documents. I stood in line for hours at the French embassy to pick up the visas, and at the Vienna police station to get the official permission to leave the country. The visas brought the promise of a new life in a distant land. In July 1938 we moved first to France than to England and finally settled in the United States in 1939.

Before the war broke out we were able to learn the fate of some of our relatives. My father's cousin Yella and her husband Siegfried owned a candy shop in Vienna. They had a daughter Gina who was my age. Yella and Gina obtained visas for England. Siegfried could not get one. He became so despondent that he killed himself. Gina was never able to adapt to her new life in England. Ten years after her father died, she killed herself, too. My father had a cousin, Adolf Kohn, who was a butcher in Vöslau. Adolf had married a Gentile and was quite active in the community, especially with the volunteer fire department. When the Nazis enacted anti-Jewish legislation and Adolf could no longer participate in these activities, he hung himself. Despite the Nazi bans, the entire fire department of Vöslau showed up for his funeral.

My father's two brothers managed to get to Palestine and one of his sisters reached New York. But his younger sister Frieda and his mother were trapped in Vienna. We didn't learn their fate until the end of the war. Frieda and her husband had taken refuge in Italy and survived. My grandmother had been sent to Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. There she was slowly starved until her body weakened and she succumbed to typhus.

My father came from a huge family that had lived in Burgenland and Lower Austria for more than 600 years. During the Holocaust many people in the family were murdered. The survivors had found refuge all over the world—England, Australia, Palestine, Sweden, Switzerland, Argentina, and even in Shanghai, China. Our family would never be reunited again.

I was able to keep in contact with a few classmates who had fled Austria. My friend Blanka Apfelbaum, the girl, who had brought the squirt gun to school, went with a Kindertransport to England. Another friend, Susi Messinger, went to Chicago in the United States. Susi is here today.

Once the war was over, we tried to find out what happened to the rest of our classmates. One of my dear friends from this school was a very beautiful girl who was trapped in Europe. One day she was out on the street, likely trying to get food for the family. She was snatched off the street and the Nazis decided to use her as a military whore.

Day after day, week after week, for hours and hours each day, she was forced to satisfy the lust of soldiers of the Third Reich. Eventually, when the Nazis no longer had a use for her—perhaps she had become pregnant—her captors sent her to the gas chamber. I cannot bring myself to reveal her name. I do not know whether she would be so ashamed of her fate that she would want to hide it forever or if she would be so angered by the injustice that she would want it broadcast to the entire world.

In 1979, my youngest daughter was in graduate school and her roommate noticed my Viennese accent. The roommate had a strong feeling that her mother should speak with me. So, she urged her mother to call me. While the mother and I were talking she said, "Do I detect a Viennese accent? One of my good friends is from Vienna. Her name is Gerda Dorn." For a moment I was too stunned to speak. My best friend in Vienna had been Magda Dorn. She was the girl who had been sent home from school with me when we wore lipstick and silk stockings. Gerda Dorn was Magda's little sister. She was eight years younger than us.

Within two weeks, the mother, Gerda, and several of our daughters all met in my home. Gerda and Magda had become separated during the war. Gerda and her parents had been hidden by a farmer in Czechoslovakia and survived, but Magda had been killed. The Dorn family had lost all its possessions during the war. Not a single photograph of Magda had survived. Gerda had been only six at the time of the Anschluss so she had only hazy memories of her sister.

I took out my photograph album from Vienna and there were several photographs of Magda. Each was inscribed to

me so Gerda could see not only what her sister looked like but also her handwriting. I gave Gerda every picture. The tears began to flow and so did the stories. I had spent so much time in the Dorn home that I could provide a detailed description of the apartment and the life of the family in normal times.

This incident brought home to me that one's history is never over. The experiences follow you. They haunt you for the rest of your life and you cannot escape.

Returning to Austria is always difficult for me. Not only are most of the Jews gone, but the memory of their existence here has often been erased. For example, in Gloggnitz, the village where my father was born, a church in the village center has a plaque that lists the soldiers from both World War I and World War II who were killed or missing. Nowhere in the village is there a similar plaque listing the Jews from Gloggnitz who were murdered or forced to flee.

That is why I commend the effort the Radetzkystraße Gymnasium has made to acknowledge the suffering of my classmates and me. You have no idea what it means to have this acknowledgement after 70 years.

Thank you.

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Over the years, the exploration of shared roots has turned some of my long-lost cousins into good friends. My home has become a destination for world travelers and I have hosted relatives from England, Germany, Austria, Russia, Israel, and Argentina, and of course the Clarks from New Zealand. The isolation forced upon me by the coronavirus pandemic was frequently broken up by emails, messages, and Facebook posts from relatives checking in from all over the world. Soon, when it is safe to travel again, there is a Swedish cousin I finally hope to meet.

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