The Legacy of Karen Gershon

"Naomi Shmuel's fascinating and well-written biography of her mother, author and poet Karen Gershon, is a labour of love."
—Professor Judy Tydor (Baumel) Schwartz, Director of The Arnold and Leona Finkler Institute of Holocaust Research, Bar Ilan University, Israel.

"With compelling empathy, piercing candor, rigorous research, and eloquent precision, the psychological and social analysis of Shmuel's biography guides us to understand Gershon's rescue to England as an emotional and creative struggle."
—Professor Phyllis Lassner, Northwestern University, USA

The Legacy of Karen Gershon:

Child Survivor to Author and Poet

By

Naomi Anne Shmuel

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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To my siblings, Chris, Tony and Stella.

And to the memory of my dear friend Professor Christoph Houswitschka, Chair of English Literature at Bamberg University, who was instrumental in facilitating the translation of Karen's letters and altogether very helpful and supportive about this book.

My Books

"Books make a difference in people's lives—
even those by the unremembered dead:
words are the angels nesting in my mind;
in that sense something of me may survive,
and centuries from now someone may find
my words as fledgling angels in his head."
(Gershon, 2001, 18).

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My mother's unwavering confidence in me as a writer enabled me to undertake the writing of this book. On the 18th of July 1992 she wrote to me:

"I hope my story will be written by someone one day and I am sure you could do it better than anyone else."

The cooperation and support of many people made this possible. Firstly, my immediate family and all those who agreed to be interviewed. Recorded interviews were conducted with my siblings Stella and Chris, and my former sister-in-law Olga Tripp. My brother Tony, my father and my uncle Philip answered my questions by correspondence. Informal, unrecorded interviews were conducted with my parents over the years, with my aunt Lise when she visited England in 1977, and with my cousins Gabriel, Nora and Paola in Rome in 2008 (considerably limited by lack of a common language). I am especially grateful to Paola for giving me Karen's letters to Lise and various photographs. My thanks also to my nephew Michael Tripp who provided me with recordings of his interviews with my father. My deep gratitude goes to various family friends who were helpful and informative many years ago when this book was just an idea, especially Aharon Appelfeld, Shmuel Huppert, Shulamit Nardi, Emunah Yaron, Ester Golan and more recently, Tzippy Kleiner.

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Various on-line resources have been very useful to me for general historical information, I would like to note:

- Holocaust Museum website https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/riga
- Yad Vashem website https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/this-month/december/1941.html
- Encyclopaedia Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page
- Holocaust Encyclopedia https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/
- The Museum of Tolerance (MOT), the educational arm of the Simon Wiesenthal Center https://www.museumoftolerance.com/education/teacher-resources/holocaust-resources/timeline-of-the-holocaust.html
- Encyclopedia Britannica on-line https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I/Killed-wounded-and-missing

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTORY NOTE AND ABBREVIATIONS

What follows is the detailed story of Karen Gershon's personal and literary life. Karen was my mother, born in Germany in 1923 as Kate[3]. I have chosen to use her first name throughout the book, beginning with Kate and later Karen. The name Gershon was her father's Hebrew name and her penname as an author and I have used it only in the case of references to her books. To me she was always Karen. This familiar terminology enhanced her proximity as I was writing, as I hope it does also for the reader.

The book comprises a combination of reconstructions of events and direct quotes, mostly from Karen's own writing and her correspondence with her sister Lise. Naturally, the story is told through my perspective, based on my research, interviews and personal experience. I have tried to be as honest as possible but qualify this by saying that someone else (even one of my siblings) would probably have written a different book. Sometimes I filled in the gaps in my knowledge with conjecture (for example, when creating dialogue between people). Since during her life Karen interacted with many people, some of them famous, I have used real names. My intention is to be candid while respectful to all the characters and I hope this is apparent in the way the story is presented.

When quoting from my mother's poems I have kept the original format, which generally includes a flow of words without capitals or punctuation marks. I feel the effect creates a continuum of images and ideas travelling directly to the heart unfiltered by pauses for breath, powerfully accurate and insightful even decades after they were written.

I would like to detail here my sources for the reconstruction in each chapter:

The Prologue is based on conversations with my father, documents provided by my uncle Philip Tripp (who conducted extensive research on the family history including Parish registries and British military records), German military records, public historical documents, and conjecture.

Chapter 1 is based on Karen's first autobiography *A Lesser Child* (Gershon, 1993), letters to her sister, and the following references: Behring (2008), Zweig (2013, written in 1942) and Elon (2002).

Chapter 3-8 are based primarily on Karen's second autobiography *A Tempered Wind* (Gershon 2009) as well as letters to her sister.

Chapter 9 is based primarily on Karen's archives, especially a document entitled *Concerning the death of my parents* (written in the 1990's), documents in German from the 1940's (sent to Karen by Rudolf Kustermeier, whose story is detailed in chapter 20) and the books Schnieder (1979), Behring (2008) and databases listed in the acknowledgements.

Chapter 10 is based on my interview with my father and letters he wrote to me (especially 22.9.1992) and Karen's letters to her sister.

The rest of the chapters are based on the multiple sources already mentioned here and in the acknowledgements.

I have used the following abbreviations to simplify denoting the source of quotes from letters:

KLL - Karen's letter to Lise
KLN - Karen's letter to Naomi
CLN - Chris's letter to Naomi
VLN - Val's letter to Naomi
CHLN - Christoph Houswitschka's letter to Naomi
KLSH – Karen's letter to President Shazar
n.d. – no date.

PROLOGUE

THE PREVIOUS GENERATION: PAUL AND VALENTINE

My two grandfathers served on opposing sides in the First World War. I have always thought that this itself illustrates the absurdity and futility of war as well as its longstanding effects. They never met each other, and I never met either of them. I imagine they both must have thought, as reality on the battlefield exceeded their worst nightmares, that the future held a better life ahead of them. Perhaps they even imagined a better world for their yet unborn children and grandchildren. History has proven them wrong; the worst horrors were ahead of them. Paul experienced them first-hand, as he was one of the six million people killed in the Holocaust. Valentine probably caught a glimpse in shocked dismay on the cinema screens in the East End of London, as the Allies liberated the concentration camps.

The unfolding world history that followed created a reality in which my own sons, entering adulthood, have had to learn to become soldiers before they learnt how to become anything else. One of them also participated in a war (the second Israel-Lebanon war in 2006). Historical reality creates patterns across the generations, played out on the world stage. As my mother wrote

> "people must be left to mourn the grief to which they have been born" (Gershon 1990, 13-14).

Looking at my own sons, beautiful, sturdy and strong, full of hopes and dreams for the future as perhaps my grandfathers once were, I ask myself: why should people be born to grief? Is this the only legacy we can offer future generations, an endless cycle of suffering? The answer lies in another poem by my mother:

> "[…]
> I will endeavour not to hate
> the men who tortured and who killed
> each of them has been a child

and was at birth immaculate
I will not curse mankind because
men have made concentration camps
a grief like mine is only stilled
by the inborn need to celebrate
[…]" (Gershon 1990, 16).

My interpretation is that we cannot celebrate without grieving first, and we cannot live without celebration. To do either sincerely we must be free of hate, not only out of our knowledge of its outcome, but also out of an acceptance of the basic human vulnerability we all share, demanding mutual responsibility. Perhaps this is what can break the endless cycle of suffering.

Before beginning my mother's story, I find it necessary to pay tribute to my two grandfathers[4]. We are all born as part of someone else's story, each generation unwittingly seeking to make amends for the failures and misfortunes of the previous generations. To zoom out from one life and see it in perspective as part of the chain of existence, can perhaps elicit some humility and compassion. The following reconstruction is based on national and military archives and family stories. Memories can be transmitted across the generations in overt and covert ways. They can transcend format and recreate ancestral and cultural pathways—a possible version of reality and people that we never got a chance to meet. Inevitably, trans-generational memories involve a certain amount of creative imagination, but I find the following statement by my friend and colleague Rony Alfandary both reassuring and empowering:

> "A certain sense of safety in the world may appear to be more important than the persistent inquisition towards the truth, knowing in advance that the truth is forever elusive and can be captured only to the extent that a shadow can be captured." (Alfandary, 2022, 56).

Valentine Tripp
London 1895

Thomas James Tripp stood by the waterside watching the cloud-filled sky in the far distance brighten with striking shades of orange as an invisible sun rose over the city. He placed his package carefully on the ground and took a deep breath. He knew he must act quickly, before anybody saw him. At that early hour of the morning only the dockworkers were out and about, groggy eyed and half sleep-walking to their shifts, they would not notice

him. But still, haste was a virtue, and yet his movements were slow as he undressed, as if he already regretted his decision.

Before leaving the small, grubby flat he was ashamed to call his home, he had lingered by the open door of the crowded bedroom where his children were sleeping but could not bring himself to take one last look at them before he left, knowing what he was about to do. He was afraid one of them might wake up, and then it would be hard to leave, or cries of "Daddy, where are you going?" would follow him into the street accusingly ringing in his ears. It was little Ethel who was likely to sense his presence, still sleeping in a cot and sucking her thumb at the age of six, with her big round blue eyes always following him. Then there were the two bunk beds, one contained nine-year-old Valentine, who insisted on sleeping on top. He was a curious child, "rugged at the edges and soft in the middle" Agnes used to say, before she died five years ago (on the 27th of May 1890) and left them all. On the bed below him was ten-year-old Margaret, with her wavy auburn hair and her mother's green eyes, who had matured instantly with her mother's death. "Little mother" he called her fondly. The other bunk bed was inhabited by eleven-year-old James, always ready to pick a fight. His brother Thomas, nicknamed Tommy to save confusion, only a year older than James, had let him choose the top bunk to stop his complaining.

Standing shivering in his underwear Thomas eyed the dark waters of the Thames as he carefully folded the clothes he had taken off and placed them on a rock. Hurriedly he checked that his worker's pass from the local factory was in the trouser pocket with his keys, that was how they would identify him. Then he opened the package and removed another set of clothes, the only suit he owned, a faded navy-blue fabric frayed at the cuffs and worn at the elbows. He wore it on top of his off-white vest, having forgotten to take another shirt. He wondered if he should have left a note, but it was too late now, he must rush as the steamship he intended to stow away on would be leaving soon. A pang of longing for his children rose inside him like a wave. He reminded himself that taking the initiative was his forte. He was the first member of his family to shorten his name from Tripconey and marry outside of Cornwall, now he imagined he would be the first to make his fortune in Australia. The thought that he might come back a rich man and be able to help them was comforting. Besides, he had not left them alone: Lucy was there, he had married her four years earlier so that she would take care of them. Good, sweet Lucy, she was a widow who had no children of her own, and despite their constant bickering and endless wants and needs she did right by them. Thomas sighed into the wind. With no spare pair of shoes, he ran barefoot to Tilbury docks.

Lucy was not surprised to find him gone in the morning. She was used to caring for his rowdy brood of children. The little girls were sweet, and Margaret was usually helpful. It was the boys she found difficult, especially James, always grumpy about something, and Valentine, quick to take offence. Tommy was the peacemaker, except when he slunk off to avoid being asked to help her look after everybody.

When Thomas's friends dropped by after work in the afternoon, to ask why he'd never shown up at the factory, Lucy grabbed Ethel by her arm and marched down to the local police station. Yes, they had been struggling financially, she answered to their questions, wasn't everybody? It didn't take them long to find his clothes at the water's edge, it was assumed he had drowned, but a body was never found. Rumours of his disappearance sparked speculations of suicide or planned escape, neither of which seemed in character for the quiet, unassuming man who had struggled to support his family through his trade, carpentry, until his depts exceeded his income and a job at the local factory had seemed like a viable solution.

"He hated it," said Joe, when he came to give Lucy some meagre belongings that had been cleared out of her husband's locker. "What are these?" she asked, holding up a small bag of stones. "Those are mine!" James grabbed them from her and showed her how some of them glistened when you held them up to the light. "Dad collected them for me," he added softly.

Lucy kept the children housed and fed for another month. She had no income, and nobody to turn to for help. Joe introduced Tommy to a ship owner who was looking for extra hands on board. The boy was tall enough to pass for older than his age and the job would provide him with a bed on the ship.

The others were marched up to the gates of the local orphanage[5].

"I'm really sorry," sobbed Lucy, "I wish things were different."

They hung their heads, the boys struggling not to cry but the girls had been weeping all morning and just then fell silent. She was the second mother they were losing. Ethel clung to Margaret. James had his hand on Valentine's shoulder. The orphanage was already full of destitute children, the staff were overworked and underpaid and the resources available for the children minimal. The older children were expected to help with the younger ones and to keep order they were always restricted to specified areas. Boys and girls were housed separately.

One morning James and Valentine were sent to help in the kitchen before breakfast. There were two big pots of porridge brewing on the stove.

“Look, they made us black porridge,” said Valentine.

“What?” James approached the pots and saw the surface of the porridge moving. “it’s cockroaches!” he exclaimed with a look of disgust.

Valentine lived in the orphanage for three years and none of the children ever saw Lucy again. It was a place he learnt to fend for himself, bury his grief under a tough exterior, and accept a certain amount of suffering as an inevitable part of his existence. He also discovered that being responsible earned him certain privileges, like being allowed to roam the streets alone, provided he came back in time with whatever he was sent to fetch for the orphanage.

At thirteen Valentine was given an errand to collect bread from the local baker for the children’s meal. Behind the counter was a notice “apprentice position open”.

“Could I be your apprentice?” asked Valentine boldly. The baker was a friendly old man; he always produced something for him when he came to pick up a delivery. The old man handed him two bags of loaves and looked him over.

“I’m a hard worker,” said the boy, standing up tall and trying to appear as serious as possible. The baker smiled at him. “I can offer you a bed in the storage room, two meals a day and a little pocket money,” he said, “as long as you do your chores and there’s no larking around.”

“Yes sir, thank you sir,” the boy smiled and ran off with his bags of bread to deposit at the orphanage for the last time.

The apprenticeship lasted until the friendly old baker died in March 1902, almost exactly two years later. By then Valentine was virtually sixteen and had little or no contact with his siblings. He was tall for his age and good looking with short blond hair, an endearing forelock, and intense bright blue eyes. When he served the customers in the shop, the ladies blushed as he smiled at them. But he was too shy to enter into conversation and preferred to man the ovens out of sight.

Walking down the street one day, wondering what his next job would be, knowing that he needed to vacate the closing bakery, he noticed a new

poster on one of the billboards calling for army recruits. Valentine decided to enlist, claiming to be two years older than his real age. Once accepted, on the 30th of April 1903, he was assigned to a training program in the medical corps. It was an ideal solution for the young orphan, providing him with a salary, a bed, and a career. Soon Valentine was dispensing medication and assisting in the local laboratories belonging to the army barracks.

At the beginning of the Great War in 1914, Valentine was a twenty-eight-year-old soldier with twelve years' experience in the medical corps, well respected by his officers and peers. Two years into the fighting which had turned Europe into a bloody battlefield, he became a Regimental Sergeant Major, active in one of the biggest field hospitals in France. The war escalated fast, the scale of casualties and injured was unfathomable—out of nearly nine million British recruits nearly one million were killed during the war and over two million wounded (Royde-Smith n.d).

With his calm, collected disposition and speed of action, Valentine became responsible for allocating casualties to appropriate medical care, assigning them for rapid evacuation or treatment in the field. The casualties ranged from war neurosis to open wounds, soldiers gassed or in urgent need of professional medical attention. His initial evaluation involved differentiating between urgent cases and those who could wait for attention, transportable casualties or those who would not survive transportation or alternatively would be able to recover within fourteen days of treatment at the field hospital. With new patients constantly flowing in, his team's decisions needed to be fast and accurate. Once made, those to be treated in the field hospital would be quickly assigned for wound dressing, treatment for "shell shock", or designated for field operations where only essential lifesaving procedures were undertaken. (Anderson n.d.; Van Way, Marble, and Thompson, n.d).

The war continued for four years. During this time the staff of the field hospitals were intermittently sent home for short breaks. It was on one of these that Valentine met Florence at a New Year's celebration event for servicemen. Both bashful and reticent, they exchanged a few pleasantries and danced together. She became his sweetheart and it was to her he hurried on his subsequent leaves.

Florence's father was also a military man, John Robert Marshall, who had enlisted at the age of fifteen to become a trumpet player. It was to the sound of his trumpet that soldiers in British India rose at the crack of dawn and marched to do their duties. Florence was born in India, she arrived in the

east end of London with her family as a teenager when her father retired. Valentine and Florence married on the 15th of October 1911, but had little time to establish their relationship before Valentine was obligated to return to what can only be described as a form of hell. It was comforting for him to know he had a wife to come back to whenever leave was possible. They both came from Christian families, a fact that was significant primarily for the purposes of births, weddings and burials. Neither of them were church-goers.

By the time the war ended Florence was pregnant with their second child, born Cecil Valentine Marshall Tripp, usually shortened to Val and known in the family as Squibbs. The first child was a girl, Beryl, a sweet baby born into the turmoil of the war with a father absent for most of her early years. Valentine remained a soldier for three years after the end of the war and was discharged at his own request on the 23rd of September 1921. After all he had seen and done it was difficult for him to adjust to having inexperienced officers younger than himself ordering him about.

But the transition to civilian and family life was not easy. Having learned as a child to keep his feelings to himself, Valentine never spoke about the war or his experiences in the army at all and refused to take part in any veterans' organizations or participate in any events organized for ex-servicemen. He tried his hand at the real estate business unsuccessfully and then took a job with a bookkeeper taking bets on horse races. When the third child, Philip, was born, the family moved to Wood Green.

Having been away from them for such long periods at the beginning and having very little memories of family life from his own childhood, Valentine found it easier to spend his time out of the house as much as possible. In the evenings he could be found at the local pub or more often at the Freemasons lodge, a fraternal organization identifiable by symbolic crests worn on the lapel or on a special ring. Being part of this brotherhood, which encouraged a deep morality and fervent secrecy, suited Valentine's silent, serious disposition.

His young wife, Florence, struggled to take care of the children and manage the household as best she could. But with little skill for either and a tendency towards anxiety and depression she took to the bottle. Valentine provided her with a weekly allowance for housekeeping, which was usually not nearly enough, partly because of excessive alcohol consumption. They often argued about money, and rarely spent any time together as a couple or as a family. Valentine was a distant, authoritarian figure to his children, hardly

communicating at all with his daughter and expecting his sons to be obedient, sporting, and manly. He often criticized Squibbs for preferring sandals over boots or cricket over football. The extent of his interaction with the boy was a frequent slap to the back of his head or a disapproving bark and Squibbs learnt to stay out of his way as much as possible. Philip could never understand why their father was kinder to him, when he was much less athletic than his brother, who won many prizes in sport and was popular with both his teachers and his peers as an outstanding student. It was Squibbs who taught Philip how to read before he started school.

As soon as he entered high school, Squibbs spent most of his time out of the house and at the age of sixteen was forced to leave school since their father refused to support him. Val found a job in the customs offices in London. From the large windows overlooking the main street he could see the long queues of hungry, unemployed men outside the local labour exchange. As he grew older, he sometimes joined their demonstrations against the government's economic policies. On occasion they were confronted by counter marches of the British Union of Fascists. Rarely did the family have meals together, but when they did these entailed fierce arguments between Val and his father, who called him unpatriotic and was disappointed to discover that his son was not only a socialist but a pacifist.

Paul Loewenthal
Eberswalde 1885

Siegmund Loewenthal grew up on a horse farm established by his father in Biesenthal, which was on a popular trading route north-east of Berlin. In 1885 he married Anne[6] and opened his own horse farm in Eberswalde, less than an hour's horse-ride further north. On this farm they raised their five children: Arthur, Ina, Paul, Bernhard and Hermann, all born exactly two years apart. When Arthur was only four years old and Paul still a baby, they were taken by their parents to witness the opening of the new local synagogue[7]. The Jewish community they belonged to at the time comprised almost three-hundred people. The synagogue was a spectacularly impressive and colourful building. Every Friday night henceforth the boys and their father gathered there with the rest of the community. Generally, Anne and the other women stayed home to put the finishing touches to the Sabbath meal.

Being a middle child Paul often felt left out, although sometimes he found an ally in Ina, who did not get on well with Arthur and liked to mother Paul.

He was an industrious child with a good sense of humour, which he used to get the attention of Bernhard and Hermann who rarely shared their secrets with Paul. Ambitious and astute, Paul was the only one of his siblings who left the horse farm for academic studies. At the age of twenty-one, in his second year studying architecture at the Universität der Künste Berlin, his mother Anne died suddenly (1911). In a smart grey suit and carrying his notes for the upcoming examinations Paul made his way by train back to his hometown for the funeral. His dark brown eyes watched the fields from the train window as a great sadness overcame him, knowing that his dear mother would not be there to greet him with her joyful, welcoming smile and homemade apple strudel. The news had been so unexpected, he had barely taken it in.

The Shiva gave the siblings some time together. The others, who had all stayed on the farm and were working with their father, had many questions for Paul about life in Berlin. Answering them made him feel like a man of the world. Ina remained on the farm to keep house for them all for another two years, after which on the 30th of June 1913 she married Wilhelm Michaelis and moved to Berlin. Paul was at the end of his degree in architecture, studying hard and struggling financially, and so welcomed the opportunity to have his Sabbath meals with his sister and her husband. They made him feel welcome, Ina made the tasty dishes which reminded Paul of his mother's cooking and Wilhelm was an amicable conversationalist. Soon the happy couple had a beautiful little baby girl named Annemarie, and a few years later a lovely boy called Hans Jürgen.

Paul had just finished his degree when he was served the papers summoning him for recruitment to the German army. He enlisted on the 2nd of August 1914 and began his military training, hurried along since the First World War had already begun. Shoulder to shoulder with his comrades-in-arms, Paul was soon dug into the trenches on the Western Front, which stretched all the way from the North Sea to the Swiss frontier with France.

With massive artillery bombardment and periodic infantry advances there was constant fear and death. Their common training, harsh conditions and lack of sufficient food or sleep brought the men close together as brothers in arms, regardless of religious affiliation or regional origins. Nothing had prepared Paul for the rapid escalation of casualties, the sheer horror of burning flesh and crudely amputated limbs, his first close-hand experience with death. With barely enough time to notify his sister Ina that he was being deployed, there was no leisure for writing letters home, and anyway he would not have known how to put into words the abhorrence of his

experiences. At times it seemed to him like futile, endless carnage, as the front lines did not advance or retreat for months on end, during which no leave was granted and morale was extremely low. He had lost track of time when his unit was called back for a respite and had no means to communicate to his family that he was still alive. It was then, in October 1916, that the Judenzählung, a census of Jewish soldiers serving in the German army, was taken, following insinuations that the Jews of Germany were not contributing to the war effort. Paul joked about this with his soldier friends. In view of their joint experiences, it seemed simply ridiculous to them. It was typical of Paul to laugh off insults or the occasional stereotypical comment[8].

It was two years after his initial recruitment that Paul was assigned to the 5th Guard Infantry division, a new unit of experienced combat soldiers. The unit arrived in the trenches near Aisne to a massive artillery attack by the British forces, followed by the assault of two French infantry units. Their aim was to capture the strategic ridge along the Chemin des Dames northeast of Paris and push the German troops back towards the German border. On the 17th of April the battle began, taking the German troops by surprise. After suffering many casualties, the soldiers sought refuge in the caves and tunnels quarried on the ridge before the war started. Hidden from the battle raging around them, Paul and two of his comrades shared a bar of chocolate that one of the soldiers had hidden in his uniform. It was all they had eaten for the past twenty-four hours. The units' next battlefield was at Cambrai in November 1917, where British tanks were used to attack the German front line. The Allies' initial success was thwarted by mechanical failure, and again the German 5th Division succeeded in breaking the onslaught. By this time the troops were suffering from fatigue and in desperate need of respite. The unit was pulled back and transferred to the reserves, for special training as an assault division.

The 5th Division re-entered the war just three months later, as part of the Spring Offensive in March 1918, forming a series of German attacks along the Western Front. But the Allied forces had established themselves in various strategic points on routes that brought supplies to the troops, so some of them were thus cut off for days at a time and were eventually forced to retreat. It was a difficult time for Paul and his fellow servicemen. After what seemed like an endless battle, they were no longer convinced it was truly possible for this war to ever come to a decisive end. They did their best to follow orders and keep each other alive, but when America joined the war effort the balance of power was clearly no longer in their favour.

Paul was standing in the trenches telling jokes to try and keep up the morale of his friends when an explosion shook the ground all around them. Paul collapsed and was evacuated to a German field hospital where he was diagnosed with cardiac neurosis and sent back to the front lines within just five days, while the soldiers who had been with him were all either dead or badly wounded. Exhausted, under fed and in poor spirits, preoccupied with the loss of his friends, Paul joined his unit for a further three days before being shot in the hip and transferred to a military hospital near the French-German border. Almost a month later he was sent on a dispatch back to Germany and ended up in Bielefeld for his convalescence. He was to receive the Iron Cross for his bravery and would be honourably discharged six months later.

He was at a loss as to what to do with himself. One Friday evening, Paul was thinking fondly about the services he attended as a child with his father in the synagogue in Eberswalde. His injury had prevented him from visiting his family since his return, though he had sent them a message that he was alive. Adolf Schönfeld, head of the Jewish Community in Bielefeld, heard about the young Jewish soldier injured and convalescing in their town, and went to visit him on Friday afternoon before services. The young man's abject, defeated look made Adolf insist on Paul accompanying him to the synagogue and from there to a meal in his home. His family were not surprised, Adolf had a habit of picking up stray or destitute Jews and inviting them for the Friday evening meal.

Cheerfully inviting this stranger into his home, he repeated "Please come in, young man," as Paul hesitated. He limped forward using the walking stick he had been given and was led into the living room, where a beautiful woman was playing the piano. Paul, who had never in his life been to a concert, thought that it was the loveliest sound he had ever heard. Suddenly just being there in this peaceful living room, with the smell of home cooking coming from the kitchen and this amazing lady before him playing the piano, Paul felt like a human being again. Adolf turned to introduce his only daughter, Selma, who found the young man's bashful shyness endearing. Hearing that he had no friends or family in Bielefeld she invited him back to visit her on the Sabbath.

This time he came to the house with flowers and found the courage to ask Selma to play for him again. It wasn't so much the music he wanted to hear, as the opportunity to watch her every movement as she played. When she finished and came towards him, he got up to kiss her. She did not resist, placing a delicate white hand gently on the nape of his neck.

Two weeks later Paul found the courage to propose. “I have one condition for you to marry my daughter,” said Adolf, his beady grey eyes looking directly at the young man before him. “She is my only child, and I would ask you to make your home here in Bielefeld.”

Paul agreed. His next mission was to visit his family in Eberswalde and invite them to the wedding. It was an emotional reunion. They hardly recognised the thin pale young man whose hair had turned grey although he was only thirty years old. Ina wept on his shoulder when she saw what five years in the trenches had done to him.

Many changes had occurred since he left. His father, Siegmund Loewenthal, had fallen ill. Bernhard, now married to Paula Sieger, had taken over the horse farm. Arthur had moved to Bernau and set up an ironware business. Hermann was planning to marry Hertha Piek from Stargard[9] and move to another part of Eberswalde to open an iron and steel business. The brothers were still active members of the Jewish community, taking their father regularly to the synagogue when he was well enough. On the train back to Bielefeld Paul thought to himself that now it was his turn to do something with his life.

Paul and Selma married on the 5th of August 1919. They knew little about each other when they made this life-changing decision, which was a sign of the times. The wedding of the daughter of the head of the Jewish community was celebrated by many members of his congregation, which at that time totalled nearly a thousand people. They were joined by Paul’s siblings and his surviving army comrades. These latter were to remain faithful to him for many years, even after some of them joined the Nazi party.

People in Bielefeld called the couple “the soldier and his doll” since they looked so stunning as they walked down the street arm in arm. Selma’s friends teased her when he did not bring her presents, till she bought herself chocolates and told them they were from him. She knew that he was not mean but poor; it was her father who helped them rent their first apartment in a good area of Bielefeld, with wide streets lined with trees and within walking distance of the town centre.

The following summer, on the 18th of July 1920, Siegmund Loewenthal died. Paul immediately took a train to Eberswalde to attend his father’s funeral at the local Jewish cemetery where nine years earlier they had buried his mother. Adolf Schönfeld was waiting for him at the station when he returned from the Shiva, eager to express his condolences and help his son-

in-law set up his business in Bielefeld. Over a glass of lager, they were soon discussing prospective customers.

Paul settled down in Bielefeld and began designing houses for all sorts of people, who found him to be professional, considerate, and pleasant. The son-in-law of the head of the Jewish community soon became popular in the town, and as a member of the German Jewish veterans' association and the war-wounded organization, he had a wide circle of friends. Paul was good company, witty, level-headed, and reliable. People turned to him for advice and enlisted his help in solving problems, for example, how to organize days of commemoration for the sons of the community lost in battle.

Anne was born in July 1921, Lise in June 1922, and Kate in August 1923. When his daughters were young Paul still used to wake up screaming with nightmares from his experiences in the trenches. Nothing prepared him for the nightmares yet to come.