

Candlelighting

Denver: 8:13 p.m.  
Boulder: 8:15 p.m.

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## The sad, sad story of Sally Levin

Doomed to anguish and evil; forgiveness and bitterness; the trigger: mental illness

By CHRIS LEPPEK

IJN Assistant Editor

**O**n a warm August morning in 1937, Sam Levin — an Orthodox Jew “highly respected in both Jewish and Gentile circles” — drove his truck to a pawnshop in Cheyenne, Wyo., paid \$3 for an “old style” Herrington Richardson revolver, drove back to his modest

house on 20th St., and picked up his 16-year-old daughter Sally. Father and daughter then drove to the outskirts of town, a forsaken stretch of prairie bordered by railroad tracks. The two exited the truck. It is unknown whether they faced one another. Levin pointed the pistol at Sal-

ly's left temple and fired. When the girl fell to the ground, he put another bullet into her breast.

He then turned the gun on himself. The first bullet lodged in his jaw, the second grazed his scalp. He drew a knife from his pocket and stabbed himself twice in the chest, but ribs protected his heart.

Two men nearby, digging for worms for a planned fishing trip, rushed to the bloody scene.

Levin was conscious, lying on the ground in front of his truck, his daughter — unconscious but gasping — by his side.

“There’s been a murder and suicide,” he told the men. “Call the police! Call somebody!”

An ambulance was called.

Levin ultimately survived his self-inflicted wounds. Sally was dead less than an hour later.

**I**n the Cheyenne of the late 1930s — an out-of-the-way and ordinarily sleepy cowboy town where front page news often included such events as horses being struck by lightning — the Levin “death pact” immediately created momentous shock waves.

By the evening of the murder,



the front page of the **Wyoming State Tribune** screamed out the news: “Cheyenne father kills daughter, 17, and then shoots and stabs himself.”

Actually, they got Sally’s age wrong. She was some two weeks shy of her 17th birthday.

As Levin began to recover from his wounds in Cheyenne’s Memorial Hospital, and began to talk, details emerged. The next day, Aug. 17, 1937, the **Wyoming Eagle** revealed: “Death pact bared in Levin ‘mercy’ slaying.”

The subhead elaborated: “Father, near death, says insanity drove both to agreement.”

Not surprisingly, the story hit the wires, spreading to newspapers across the country, the 1937 equivalent of going viral.

It was a bizarre and tragic tale like few had heard before.

It was certainly nothing which Suzanne Handler, Sam Levin’s granddaughter — and the niece of the ill-fated Sally Levin — ever would have imagined happening in her own family.

She first heard the story in 1991, when she was herself 50 years old.

See SALLY on Page 8

The trigger shocked a town and shamed a family — and became a deep, deep secret

## IJN wins eight journalism awards

Rockower Awards in eNewsletter, commentary, arts and criticism, features, personalities, Jewish history

**T**he INTERMOUNTAIN JEWISH NEWS won eight Simon Rockower Awards for Excellence in Jewish Jour-

nalism at the American Jewish Press Association’s 32nd annual conference June 24-27 in Seattle, Wash.

AJPA judges bestow only first- and second-place awards. There are two circulation categories, over 15,000 and under 15,000, for most entries; the IJN falls in the under 15,000 category.

IJN winners are as follows:

- Rabbi Hillel Goldberg, IJN executive editor, first place, Louis Rapoport Award for Excellence in Commentary, “Black hole and the light of faith” (Jan. 6, 2012);
- Andrea Jacobs, IJN senior writer, first place, Excellence in Arts

and Criticism News and Features, “The victory of Jewish music over evil” (Education and Culture, Aug. 10, 2012). This article competed against all newspapers, magazines, special sections, supplements and web-based outlets.



- Shana Goldberg, IJN web editor, first place, Excellence in Organizational Newsletters, IJN weekly eNewsletter, which is emailed to participating subscribers.

Additional honors include:

- Hillel Goldberg, second place, Excellence in Single Commentary, “What they didn’t tell me on my Bar Mitzvah” (Jan. 27, 2012);

- Hillel Goldberg, second place, David Frank Award for Personality Profiles, “Hadassah’s founder: The lonely and courageous life of Henrietta Szold” (Education and Culture, Aug. 10, 2012);
- Hillel Goldberg, second place,

Jacob Rader Marcus Award for American Jewish History, “Hadassah’s founder: The lonely and courageous life of Henrietta Szold.” (Education and Culture, Aug. 10, 2012).

- Andrea Jacobs, second place, Award for Excellence in Feature Writing, “Cremation vs. burial: the final act” (Kosher Living, March 23, 2012).

- Chris Leppek, IJN assistant editor, second place, Excellence in News Reporting, “Is marijuana kosher?” (Kosher Living, March 23, 2012).

### INSIDE

Business .....	13
Classifieds .....	19
Columnists .....	4, 23
Editorials .....	24
Leisure .....	12
Lively Opinion .....	4
Obituaries .....	20
Readers Speak .....	5
Shmoos .....	22
Synagogues & Calendar .....	21
Today’s Life .....	10
<b>Weekly calendar, sports</b>	<b>14</b>



### NEXT FRIDAY

#### IJN’s new e-Edition — How to get it

If you are a current subscriber, please navigate directly to <http://ijn.newspaperdirect.com>.

Click on “Print Subscribers Pay Less.”

You will be verified as a print subscriber and offered the reduced \$14.04 rate for your “digital add-

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If you want to subscribe to both the print and the e-Edition, contact the IJN at 303-861-2234; or go to [www.ijn.com](http://www.ijn.com) and click on the

“Subscribe” tab to subscribe to the print edition, after which you will be eligible for the discounted annual e-Edition price of \$14.04.

People who only want the digital e-Edition can register at the e-Edition website, <http://ijn.newspaperdirect.com>.

NEWS: Wyoming

# Cheyenne, 1937: Death pact

## Father-daughter murder-suicide ‘agreement’ caused shock waves — then was hidden

SALLY from Page 1

She never knew that she had an aunt named Sally whom she had never met.

She never knew that the grandfather whom she knew and loved until he died, many years later, had committed an act she found “unfathomable.”

Handler, now 71 and a resident of Greenwood Village, explains that 76 years ago, after the dust settled back into the Wyoming prairie — after Levin pled guilty to manslaughter and was given five years probation in an amazingly lenient sentence for the time — nobody in the Levin family ever breathed a word about that August morning.

By the end of the year 1937, the entire family, including Handler’s mother Esther, had left Wyoming for California. All of them changed their names.

Not one of them, including Handler’s mother, ever told their children about what took place in Cheyenne.

Nor was any mention ever made of a daughter — or, in Handler’s case, an aunt — by the name of Sally.

“And they left this girl,” Handler says of the aunt she never knew, “buried in this cemetery in Cheyenne.”

The family left behind Sally’s simple grave and tombstone in Cheyenne, with her name pitifully misspelled “Salie” and no Jewish symbols or inscriptions.

In 2013, in Denver, Suzanne Handler’s eyes fill with tears when she relates visiting Sally’s grave for the first time a few years ago.

“I was horrified,” she says. “I stood before her stone and I sobbed. It’s so sad. It pains me that nobody ever visited that girl. She was forgotten. I just want her to be remembered.”

A book published by Handler a few weeks ago — *The Secrets They Kept* — is her way of restoring her Aunt Sally to memory, and of issuing a chilling warning to people in the pre-

‘No one in the family would talk to me about Sally’

sent day forced to confront the challenges of mental illness.

Its subtitle — “The true story of a mercy killing that shocked a town and shamed a family” — hints at the dark tale told within.

As of early June, Handler had sold more than 6,000 copies of the book through such outlets as Amazon, Tattered Cover, Barnes & Noble and Bookies, strongly suggesting that her theme, and the story itself, has struck a nerve.

In a recent interview with the INTERMOUNTAIN JEWISH NEWS, Handler related the chronological events that form the story’s foundation.

Her grandfather, Sam Levin, was an Orthodox Jew who grew up near Kiev. He came to the US in 1911 through Bremen, Germany and Galveston, Tex. He settled first in Omaha, where his wife and one child joined him soon after.

Two more children, including Handler’s mother, were born in Omaha, before Levin moved to the Cheyenne area, securing free land in Granite Canyon through the Second Homestead Act in 1916.

“There was nothing in Granite



### GRANDDAUGHTER AND NIECE

Suzanne Handler

Canyon other than grassland,” Handler says, “so in the end he sold it to a livestock company, Warren Livestock, which is still in business in Cheyenne.”

In the early 20s, the family moved to Cheyenne where Levin, originally a blacksmith by trade, opened a second hand furniture store. Two more children, including Sally, born on Sept. 6, 1920, were added to the family there.

The dearth of information from firsthand sources have made it difficult for Handler to fully describe Sally’s childhood.

Her mother, she says, “gave me a *little* information,” but was close-mouthed about virtually everything concerning her younger sister.

“No one in the family,” Handler says, “would talk to me about Sally.”

One of the few things her mother told her was that the girl was “very shy, very quiet,” and that with her dark hair and coloring she looked somewhat different from the rest of the family.

A couple of women who attended high school with Sally in the 30s remembered little about her, except for the fact that the girl went by the nickname “Blackie.”

The only existent photograph of Sally is a family portrait which shows her as a pretty girl, about 10 years old, wearing a Buster Brown haircut, a plain dress and an enigmatic, rather melancholy expression.

Handler has examined the old sepia-tint print minutely, looking for clues to the mysterious girl’s personality.

“All the other women in the picture are dressed up,” she says. “They have pearls on and nice dresses. The boys are wearing their little suits. It looks like Sally is in a rag. The person who sent this to me said, ‘There was something about her. They didn’t like her. She was treated differently.’”

Handler isn’t sure about that con-

clusion, but she has been able to discover that by the time Sally reached early adolescence the first clear symptoms of mental illness began to appear.

In the summer of 1937 — not long before her death — Sally tried to stab herself and one of her brothers with a butcher knife. She also made an attempt, using a gas stove, to set the family home on fire, with its occupants,

In the summer of 1937 — not long before her death — Sally tried to stab herself and one of her brothers with a butcher knife

including herself, inside.

After that, Levin took his daughter to a Cheyenne physician. He suggested that he travel to Denver to consult with a psychiatrist — a “Dr. Hilton,” who worked at a sanitarium, the name of which Handler has never been able to ascertain.

Levin and his daughter did this. Dr. Hilton quickly diagnosed Sally with “dementia praecox,” an early term for what is today recognized as a form of adolescent-onset schizophrenia.

“While in Denver,” Handler says, “Sally had an episode, a complete psychotic breakdown, and she had to be hospitalized in this sanitarium for a week. What she saw there, I think, convinced her.”

What Sally experienced at the Denver sanitarium, Handler believes, was probably quite horrific, considering the state of psychi-

ing structures on a barren prairie.

Handler has combed through many accounts of asylums from that era, leading her to conclude that the reality of life in such an institution was much worse than its appearance, she says.

After Sally’s week in Denver, Handler speculates, “she knew that she was going to be committed to an insane asylum . . . They knew that the doctor had said that she was incurable, that she would probably go in and never come out.

“In those years there were no psychotherapeutic drugs. That we do know. In 1937, the year that she would have been committed, was the beginning of lobotomies in the United States. They were given just as a matter of routine. I mean, it was so barbaric you wouldn’t believe it.”

Handler believes that such grim tidings led father and daughter — possibly on their drive from Denver back to Cheyenne — to come to a tragic agreement: Nothing less than a death pact.

Levin’s act of slaying his daughter conjures bleak echoes of the biblical account of Abraham preparing to kill Isaac, but without the Divine intervention that saved the son from his father’s hand.

Handler still finds it impossible to fathom how Levin could have committed the act.

“It’s something so impossible to imagine,” she says, “so unbelievable. As a parent of grandparent age, I cannot fathom any reason — any reason — for killing my own child, for taking my own child out to a field, standing a couple feet away and blowing her brains out. I just cannot imagine. A child is such an integral part of your life, and to snuff that out is unfathomable to me.”

Still, illustrating the powerful and paradoxical crosscurrents of the story, Handler also finds it impossible

atric care in the 1930s.

“I assume,” Suzanne says, “that all of the institutions resembled Bedlam” — the notorious London insane asylum whose name has become synonymous with chaos.

Levin and his daughter faced a diagnosis that was considered incurable in the 1930s. The only way Levin could protect his daughter, not to mention the rest of his family, was to institutionalize Sally.

That meant committing her to the Wyoming state sanitarium, then located in the remote town of Evanston. Handler has located photos of the place as it would have appeared in the late 30s — with forbidding and macabre-looking

to condemn the man who pulled the trigger.

“The question has come up, was my grandfather a monster or was he a hero?” she ponders.

“I say neither. I say he was a man of great courage. What would you do in 1937? He barely spoke English and was told that his child, his daughter, was incurable, that she was going to do harm to herself or somebody else, that she needed to be put away.

“Do I think he knew what was going on in Evanston, at this psychiatric hospital? I doubt it. I don’t think he could read the newspapers. But he knew from what he’d seen in Denver.”

Levin would later testify that his daughter had flatly refused to go to the Evanston sanitarium — that she had told him that she would kill herself first.

Newspaper accounts reported that Levin also testified that Sally had told him that she wanted to die, and that she wanted her father to die with her.

“That was supposedly his dilemma,” Handler says, adding that testimony also revealed that Levin had told his doctor that he agonized over his decision for three days and nights.

An observant Jew, he almost surely disapproved of suicide, not to mention homicide. That must have made his final decision all the more agonizing and illustrates its desperation, in Handler’s view.

She recounts the actual events, at first, with the matter-of-fact stoicism of a homicide detective. As she draws nearer to the story’s awful climax, however, her voice breaks and tears descend.

“I know this story so well,” she says. “I’ve lived and slept with it since 2004. Every day, all day.

“He drove her in his truck. He had a little panel truck . . . and he wrote a suicide note, in Yiddish. He signed her name and his name.

“He shot her once in the head and once in the breast. She fell to his feet, right in front of him, and then he shot himself twice in the head. One bullet grazed his scalp and

‘I say he was a man of great courage. What would you do in 1937?’

lodged in the windshield of his truck behind him. Then he stabbed himself twice in the chest with his pocketknife.”

Handler wonders whether Levin’s suicide attempt was half-hearted, not because he was afraid to die but because he felt that death itself might have been a coward’s way out.

“He said he was going to take her life and his life. The suicide note speaks to that. But it’s interesting that when he shot himself and stabbed himself he might have realized at the moment, ‘I’m going to suffer the consequences by not dying.’ Maybe he didn’t really mean to die.”

Levin’s guilty plea to manslaughter — before “a very compassionate judge,” Handler says — not only kept him out of prison but allowed him to leave the state of Wyoming.

The family’s decision to leave might have been encouraged by the frosty reaction of Cheyenne’s



NEWS: Wyoming

SALLY from Page 8

small but mostly observant Jewish community, centered at Mt. Sinai congregation, where Levin had been a very respected member.

“It was a scandal — a *shanda*,” Handler says, explaining that local historian Dorothy Feldman, who remembers the events of 1937, told her of the community’s reaction.

“It wasn’t a lynch mob, but a lot of the Jews of Cheyenne turned their back on him.”

As the year of 1937 drew to a close, the Levin family left Cheyenne and their tragic memories — and the body of their dark-haired daughter — behind, moving to Long Beach, Calif.

Handler acknowledges that she can never be absolutely sure that Sally was a willing victim in the death pact. But the possibility that she wasn’t willing is remote, she says, and doesn’t haunt her.

“She demonstrated that she wanted to kill herself anyway. And based on my knowledge about schizophrenics and the state of treatment in those years, I think she would have eventually done it.”

She cannot bring herself to hate her grandfather, who lived into the late 1970s.

She remembers the facial scar from one of his self-inflicted bullets, never knowing what caused it, and his dignified, taciturn personality.

“I grew up with my grandfather,” Handler says. “He was always very sweet to me, very loving.”

Handler cannot deny that what took place in 1937 was “premeditated murder,” not only by Jewish, but by Christian and Muslim, law. Still, she thinks her grandfather’s act was courageous — perhaps even an act of love for his daughter and family — and has totally forgiven him.

But she refuses to forgive Levin, or her mother, for their decision to bury their dark memories and turn them into secrets.

Handler, who ironically chose a

‘If you have a secret and you want to keep it, it’s a burden’

psychological profession — she is retired from her career as a mental health educator with the Arapahoe-Douglas Mental Health Center — says that keeping secrets is never a wise course.

“I know that keeping secrets is damaging to the secret keeper. If you have a secret and you want to keep it, it’s a burden. You have to be careful, have to watch what you say and it eats at you. It affects your mental health, your physical health.”

Handler was first told the story of Sally’s fate in 1991, when her aunt (who married one of Sally’s brothers) brought it up during a graduation party for one of Handler’s sons.

Handler had been complaining about the fact that her mother had decided not to attend the party, a decision that conformed to a venerable family pattern.

“I had a very difficult relationship with my parents — forever,” Handler says. “I always knew that something was not right. As all children

do, I thought it was me, but there was a block, a barrier, that I was too young to climb. With my mother especially, there was a total disconnect.

“So I was bitching about my mother to my Aunt Virginia. ‘Why didn’t she come from Long Beach? Why is she always so impossible?’ My aunt had heard this tirade many times before. She took me by the hand, she sat me down and she said, ‘Suzanne, you need to ease up on your mom. She’s had a rough time.’”

Her aunt told her that when she married Handler’s uncle, she was told a secret and made to promise that she would never reveal it.

In light of Handler’s anger at her mother, she decided, at long last, to break that promise.

Handler was told: “Your mother had a sister, and her name was Sally.

“Then she paused and said, ‘And your grandpa Sam killed her. He shot her. I don’t know why and I don’t know the details. I was told to never tell anyone. But that’s what happened.’”

Handler’s eyes cloud over once more with tears.

“I was in shock. I kept saying, this is impossible. I don’t believe it. What would you think if all you believed about your family was a myth? That my grandfather killed a girl that I didn’t even know existed?”

“Then I got mad. I was actually angry. Why was I not told this? I was 50 years old when my Aunt Virginia told me this story.”

Over time, however, as her anger faded “and as the puzzle pieces fell into place,” Handler concluded that the story explained a lot about her family’s dysfunction.

For the rest of the 1990s, Handler was forced to put the tragic story

aside. She had to deal with her own life-and-death issues — two difficult bouts with breast cancer, both of which she fought and eventually overcame.

In 2004, a cousin who had done his own digging into the family’s past sent Handler a package filled with government documents and newspaper clippings — a piecemeal saga of Sally’s fate — and Handler found herself on a mission.

“He opened the door for me,” Handler says of her cousin.

That door led inexorably into



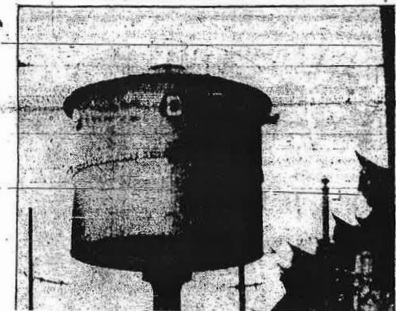
GRANDFATHER  
Sam Levin, 1937.

her investigations and explorations of the events of decades before, and into a prolonged and often painful battle with tightly-kept secrets — and ultimately to her book.

Just as much as *The Secrets They Kept* is about bringing the story of Sally’s life into the light, the book is “about keeping secrets, and about how harmful it can be,” Handler says.

CHEYENNE FATHER KILLS DAUGHTER, 17, AND THEN SHOOTS AND STABS HIMSELF

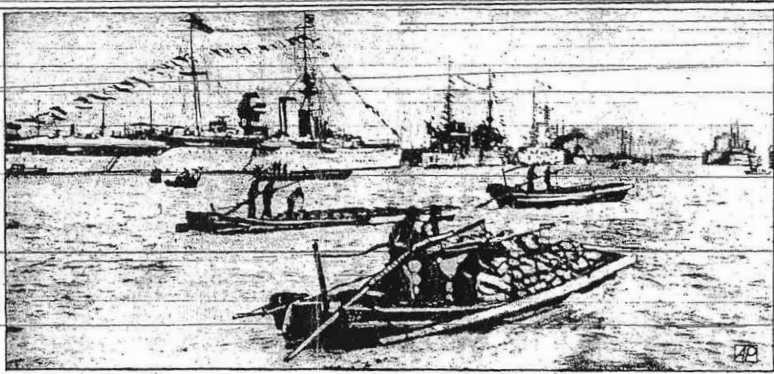
**THUNDER OVER** Shanghai. Troops, guns and marching men of many nations rattled in increasing tempo down Shanghai's streets as that international city of the Far East with 3,000,000 residents . . . 3,000 Americans among them . . . have been caught in the deadly Sino Japanese conflict. Japan's mighty warships filled the harbor and Nipponese bluecoats unloaded tons of munitions. These American troops at Shanghai are prepared for "any eventuality."



WYOMING STATE TRIBUNE

Cheyenne, Wyoming, Monday, August 16, 1937

**BATTLESHIP ROW OFF SHANGHAI** where Japanese warships are the targets of Chinese planes. Early Sunday the planes missed their targets and bombs fell among residents of Shanghai, killing nearly 600 persons, including at least three Americans. The Japanese vessels pictured here are laden with thousands of marines and large supplies of munitions as Tokyo marshals its forces to prepare for any eventuality. The harbor is clogged with ships. Some American refugees were taken Monday to liners ready to leave the danger zone.



Americans Evacuated As Chinese Press Attacks

War Called Unpopular In Japan

Liners McKinley and Hoover Standing by to Take Refugees Out of Shanghai—Assault Pushed on Land, Sea and in the Air

SHANGHAI—(Tuesday)—(AP)—Chinese soldiers drove desperately at Japan's fortress-like naval headquarters under the glare of starshells early Tuesday morning as the land, sea and air battle of Shanghai entered its fifth day. On both banks of the Whangpoo River, Shanghai's out-

Directs Activity of Asiatic Fleet



Sam Levin Is Given Good Chance To Recover

Proprietor of Store Takes Girl to City Limits Where Shooting Occurs—Injuries to Her Fatal Nearly an Hour Later

A double tragedy struck Monday at a Cheyenne family when the father shot and fatally wounded his 17-year-old daughter and then attempted suicide by firing twice at himself and then stabbing himself with a knife. Envisioning himself a "mercy" executioner in permanently relieving his daughter, Sally, of pain caused friends said, by a mental malady, Sam Levin, about 52, proprietor of a second hand goods store at 1613 Pioneer Avenue, drove out of the city limits near the Lincoln Way subway and sent two bullets crashing into the girl's body at 11:05 a. m. Monday, causing wounds which proved fatal 50 minutes later. Levin then turned the firearm on himself, friends of the family told.

The first bullet struck him in the left cheek, imbedding itself near the bone. The second grazed his scalp. A rib deflected the knife from his heart. The dying girl and her father were rushed to Memorial Hospital by the Worland ambulance. Sally succumbed shortly afterward of wounds in her right breast and the left side of the head.

Levin probably will recover, police said. The bodies of Levin and the girl were found near the family automobile on a dump lot on the west side of an embankment on which the Colorado and Southern railroad tracks are laid.

Two Cheyenne men—Francis C. Stanny of 1011 Warren Avenue and Frank Baird of Storey Area—who were digging nearby for worms for a contemplated fishing trip, heard four shots and rushed to the scene.

"CALL THE POLICE!" FATHER GAPS When they arrived on the scene Levin gasped. "Murder and suicide, call the police." Stanny notified Deputy Sheriff A. D. (Bud) Farver, who in turn called Acting Chief of Police Norbert E. Turk and City Detective Harvey Jackson. Although police said they were officially unable to learn Levin's

Cheyenne Wyoming

By JOHN C. THOMPSON

LUSK—(Special)—From Cheyenne to Lusk is 141 miles. The traverse may be made reasonably in 245 minutes, with a 45-minute stop in Torrington to stretch your legs and look around. U. S. 85 and U. S. 26, which are the route, are oil-surfaced all the way, in excellent condition. Even a long stretch north of Jay Em which is just receiving its brunette complexion doesn't slow you up much. Other than Torrington you pass four towns en route — Hawk Springs, Yoder (a mile off to the left), Linslie and Jay Em. They are not impressive. Torrington and Lusk are decidedly so. Virtually

“One out of 17 adults in America is being treated for a serious mental illness, which includes major depression, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder,” Handler says. “Those are the big three.”

She sees a few encouraging signs, applauding Gov. John Hickenlooper for his efforts to broaden care for the mentally ill in Colorado, and President Obama for his recent remarks about the need for more treatment of mental illness and changes in our collective attitude toward it.

‘I think her life was doomed’

Handler is optimistic that things will improve, if only because “every time there’s a mass shooting, like the guy in Arizona who tried to kill Gabby Giffords and succeeded in killing four others, or our own homegrown guy here in Aurora, or the guy in Newtown . . . every time these incidents happen, they get a lot of press.”

She pauses, considering her own family’s experience.

“And people are afraid of the mentally ill,” Handler adds at last.

“We need to face this as a nation. We need to address this in a serious way.”

Finally, relinquishing her voice of advocacy and soapbox, Handler turns her thoughts inwards, back to Sally.

This September, she says, she plans to travel to Cheyenne in the company of her rabbi, Richard Rheins of Temple Sinai, to visit the cemetery which holds Sally’s lone-some grave.

“I ordered a new headstone for her,” Handler says, “with her name properly spelled and with a Jewish inscription that will honor her life.

“And the rabbi will say the prayer over her body.”