

## A long-buried secret rocks a family

Author's story of her aunt sheds light on mental illness

By Alexandra Lapkin

Advocate Staff

Suzanne Handler's life took a turn at her son's graduation party in 1991, when she accidentally learned a family secret that was buried for decades.

When Handler, who lives in Colorado, learned from an aunt by marriage that her grandfather took the life of his mentally ill 16-year-old daughter in 1937, she knew that she would have to tell the story of Sally Levin.

"No one had ever mentioned her name," said Handler, who worked as a mental health educator until she retired eight years ago. "I did not know my mother had this sister; I did not know my grandfather was involved in this criminal act."

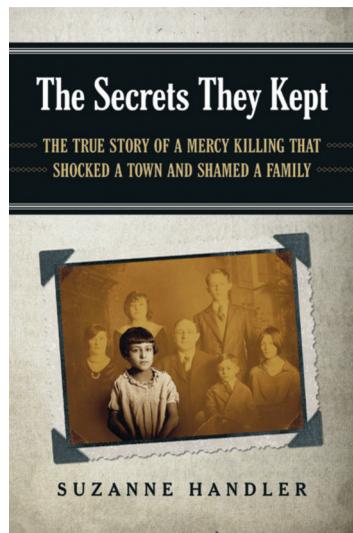
Handler's book, "The Secrets They Kept: The True Story of a Mercy Killing that Shocked a Town and Shamed a Family," released in January, is a culmination of an effort that included digging through court records, reading newspaper clippings, and attempting to grasp tidbits of information from Handler's family, which proved to be the most difficult part of the process. "When I approached my mother in 2004, and I said, 'I know the story and I want to talk to you about your sister Sally,' she said, 'I don't want to discuss it, ever.'"

Handler's mother, who grew up in an Orthodox home in

Cheyenne, Wyo., had four siblings, including Sally. After Sally's death, the two brothers and two sisters made a pact to never tell the story to anyone. The family moved to California and everyone, except for Sam Levin, Handler's grandfather, changed their last name to escape the shame that followed the Levins in Cheyenne. But as "my mother was getting older," Handler said, "there were cracks in her armor about it and eventually she told me a little bit, but never very much."

Levin emigrated from Russia at the turn of the century and eventually came to Wyoming for the free land offered through the Second Homestead Act. He became a businessman, as well as the President of the local synagogue.

When Sally, his second-youngest child, tried to set the family's house on fire and stab herself and one of her brothers with a butcher knife, the family knew that something was extremely wrong. Levin took his daughter to a psychiatrist in



Suzanne Handler's book tells the story of her mentally ill aunt.

Denver, Colo., who gave Sally a diagnosis – dementia praecox – known today as schizophrenia. "He was told his daughter is incurable, dangerous," Handler said. In the 1930s, there was no medication to treat mental illness and the only solution was to be institutionalized in a mental asylum. When Sally had an episode while in Denver and was hospitalized at the sanitarium for a week, she got a taste for what it would be like to live in a similar institution.

"[Sally] was going to go to this asylum and in those days they put handicapped, they put criminally insane, they put cripples, they put blind people, they put everybody together," Handler said.

"It would have been a hell-hole."

Rabbi Joseph Meszler, the spiritual leader of Temple Sinai of Sharon, has worked at the Pauline Warfield Lewis Center for Mental Health in Cincinnati while attending Hebrew Union College. Although his experi-

ence with a mental institution occurred more than 50 years after Sally's time, Meszler said he believes that the conditions in many ways were just as disturbing.

"We need institutions because families can't take care of their loved ones all by themselves – I mean, that just makes sense, that's appropriate," Meszler said. "There are times when we are at our limit, and that's Jewish too. Maimonides says that when you have a loved one, usually a parent, and you simply cannot take care of them yourself, you are permitted to pay someone to help take care of them."

In Sally's case, she was to be committed to a state asylum 400 miles away from home.

"She would have spent her life in this institution," Handler said. "And the statistics on the people who have schizophrenia, even today, [say] they are more likely to commit suicide than the general population."

For lack of better options, soon after returning from Denver, the father and daughter seem to have agreed on a death pact. On the morning of the crime, in August 1937, Levin wrote a suicide note in Yiddish and signed both his and Sally's names.

Levin drove to an open field, where he proceeded to shoot his

Continued on next page

# A long-buried secret rocks a family

Continued from previous page

daughter and then himself. “I really have trouble with it,” Handler said. “But I didn’t live in 1937; I wasn’t an immigrant. ...I didn’t live in a town like Cheyenne where there were no resources.”

Although Sally died within an hour, Levin survived the suicide attempt and pleaded guilty for manslaughter. The judge considered the circumstances and decided to keep him out of prison, ordering Levin to serve a period of probation instead.

Despite the respect Levin commanded in Cheyenne among the Jewish community, “He was ostracized,” Handler said, “because what greater crime in Judaism is there than taking the life of somebody, especially your own child?” The family fled Cheyenne as soon as the sentencing was over.

After she retired in 2006,

Handler had more time to “poke around and get the real story,” she said. She obtained court documents, which allowed her to piece together some of the facts. Although Handler’s mother and her siblings strongly opposed the revelation of their family secret, their children supported the publication of her book “because I’m talking about the impact of keeping secrets on families,” Handler said. “It kind of ruined my life.”

She added that she had always known “there was something going on, but I didn’t know what it was. ...I had a lot of issues with my mother growing up because there was this barrier between us,” Handler said.

Handler said that forgiving her mother, who died at the age of 92, is difficult, but she is “working on it.” As for her grandfather, “I never was mad at

my grandfather,” Handler said. “I don’t consider him a hero; I don’t consider him a monster. I do consider him courageous, because I think it took a lot of courage for a father to do what he did.”

Handler is about to add a final chapter to Sally’s story. Since the family was in California, it remains a mystery who ordered Sally’s gravestone and misspelled her name on it. “I felt that was such an insult,” Handler said. “Not only did she die the way she died, not only was she left behind for 75 years to have her grave never be visited, but her name is misspelled.” Handler ordered a new gravestone with the correct spelling and Hebrew markings, and will fly to Cheyenne with her rabbi for a rededication ceremony in September.

After having written the book, Handler’s work is not done. She would like to use her family’s

story as a catalyst to spark conversations about mental illness and help remove the stigma that diseases such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression, and others, still carry today. Although there is less misunderstanding of mental illness today than in 1937, “but I think it’s still there,” she said.

For the most part, mental illness is portrayed in a negative light on the news, whenever there is a mass shooting and

the shooter’s mental disorders are discussed, according to Handler. “They never talk about recovery, they never talk about

the people who are making it,” she said. “I worked in mental health for so long, I saw people who... are doing fine. Some aren’t, but very few of them are murderers.”

Visit [www.suzannehandler.com](http://www.suzannehandler.com)

Reprint of The Jewish Advocate™

Copyright © 2013 The Jewish Advocate, Inc., Jewish Advocate Pub. Corp. All Rights Reserved.

The Jewish Advocate® is protected by international copyright, trademark and other intellectual property laws. Reproduction, or storage in a retrieval system, or in any other form is prohibited.

You may not modify, copy, reproduce, republish, upload, post, transmit or distribute in any way any material from this reprint, the newspaper, or the website.

To purchase reprints contact: [sharonh@TheJewishAdvocate.com](mailto:sharonh@TheJewishAdvocate.com)

The Jewish Advocate 15 School Street, Boston, MA 02108 • Tel: 617-367-9100 • [www.TheJewishAdvocate.com](http://www.TheJewishAdvocate.com)

Published weekly on Friday by The Jewish Advocate, Inc.

To subscribe online go to [www.TheJewishAdvocate.com](http://www.TheJewishAdvocate.com) or call 617-367-9100 x120.

The Jewish Advocate, The Jewish Times, The Boston Jewish Times, and The Jewish News of Western Massachusetts are trademarks registered with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. Periodicals Postage is paid at Boston, Massachusetts.

ISSN 1077-2995. (USPS-275-020).

Jewish  
News

JEWISH  
TIMES