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PRESS RELEASE

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**A Mental Health Educator Reclaims Her Lost Aunt, Shares Her Story,
And Reveals a Family's Painful Past**

"Suzanne, your mother had a younger sister and her name was Sally."

"Sally?" I asked. "I never heard of a sister named Sally."

Very slowly, this time in a voice barely above a whisper, my uncle's wife continued, "Your Grandpa Sam killed her when she was only sixteen years old. He shot her somewhere outside Greeley, Colorado."

"He *killed* her?" I shook my head in disbelief, unable to comprehend what I was hearing. My grandfather, the sweet old man who sang Yiddish tunes to my children when they were little? He shot and killed his own daughter? Impossible. Why would he have done such a terrible thing? And who was Sally?

The secret shared with Suzanne Handler on that day was short on explanation, but it was nevertheless life changing. Suzanne's grandfather, by then long deceased, had been the symbol of quiet strength and stability in the Levin family, and he was the one person Suzanne's mother admired above all others. Suzanne, too, had loved and respected her Grandpa Sam. What, Suzanne kept asking herself, was she to do with the explosive information that threatened to

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destroy the essence of her reality? What was her responsibility to herself and to the rest of her family -- particularly, to those whom she presumed were also unaware of this incredible story?

Suzanne didn't question her mother immediately, nor did she talk to anyone else in the family about it. Instead, in deference to the promise she made her aunt, she kept silent. But she told herself that, one day, when the time was right, she would find out more about what happened on August 16, 1937, and why.

The exploration of this mystery led to the publication of Suzanne's book, *The Secrets They Kept: The True Story of a Mercy Killing That Shocked a Town and Shamed a Family*. This is the narrative of a family tragedy steeped in mystery that combines memoir, journalistic reporting, and true crime in a compelling tale of mental illness, murder, and the universal love of a parent for his child. With a 26-year career as a mental health educator, Suzanne provides an insightful perspective on the stigma associated with major mental illnesses such as the "dementia praecox" (schizophrenia) with which her Aunt Sally had been diagnosed. Ms. Handler also shares aspects of Jewish life in late-nineteenth century Ukraine that may have influenced her grandfather's anguished decision to save his daughter, at all costs, from a painful life of incarceration behind the walls of an asylum.

Suzanne's investigative journey brought her to Cheyenne, Wyoming, where her mother's youngest sister, Sally Levin, was born in 1920, the fourth of five siblings. Suzanne's immigrant grandparents (Russian Jews) raised their children in a religiously observant home where the Sabbath was faithfully observed, dietary rules known as *Kashrut* (Kosher) were strictly followed, and religious services at the oldest synagogue in the state were regularly attended. Mental illness was an off-limits topic of conversation because it was strange and frightening and, of course, because it was misunderstood. If there were signs, they were carefully hidden behind closed doors.

Today, Sally rests in the Jewish cemetery, not far from the only home she ever knew. Suzanne

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concludes, "It was Sally's wish that she never leave Cheyenne and, indeed, she never will. Sally's name and memory have been lost to the world for generations. It is time to tell her story, for she deserves no less."

The Secrets They Kept: The True Story of a Mercy Killing That Shocked a Town and Shamed a Family

By Suzanne Handler

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Suzanne Handler

Suzanne Handler has been published in the *Denver Post*, *The Rocky Mountain News*, and Senior Wire News Service. A major focus of Ms. Handler's 26-year career as Director of Community Education Resources included writing and presenting self-esteem building curricula to elementary and middle school students and their parents, as well as teachers, school psychologists, and social workers in the communities she served. As a result of these efforts, Ms. Handler understands the stigma, and lack of public awareness, associated with mental illnesses in our society. Based in the Denver, Colorado area, Suzanne is the author of *The Secrets They Kept: The True Story of a Mercy Killing That Shocked a Town and Shamed a Family*.

Suggested Interview Questions

1. What's unusual about your family? How is it different from other families?
2. Why do you think your mother hid the truth about your family's infamous past for more than seven decades?
3. Why did your uncle's wife finally reveal the family's secret to you?
4. How did you react to that revelation?
5. Does your family's history reinforce, or perhaps change, your perspective on mercy killing/ euthanasia?
6. How did you go about researching your family's saga? Was it as easy as doing a Google search?
7. What were the most surprising facts that your investigation into your Aunt Sally's life, and her death, revealed?
8. What was your relationship with your grandfather during your childhood?
9. Now that you know the truth about what happened all those years ago, have your feelings for your grandfather and your mother changed?
10. What do you think would have happened to your Aunt Sally had she lived?
11. It appears your grandfather meant to commit suicide on that fateful day. What went wrong?
12. What was your grandfather's punishment for killing his daughter?
13. In your opinion, did the punishment fit the crime?

Treating Mental Illness (circa, 1937)

At the time of Sally Levin's death, treatment of the seriously mentally ill was often cruel and barbaric, and at minimum, lacking in options. There were, for example, no effective medications for the management of symptoms; the advent of psychotherapeutic drugs was decades in the future. There also were no outpatient clinics or recognized protocols for integrating mentally ill patients back into the community. Fear of the severely mentally ill was commonplace, and understanding the nature of brain diseases was in its infancy.

Desperate parents and exhausted caregivers were left with only two choices: lock the sufferer behind closed doors and prepare to monitor his or her every move, or, if the family had funds, commit the person to a privately run psychiatric facility. For most families of the mentally ill such an extravagance was out-of-the-question. These unfortunate souls were more often committed to state-run insane asylums where they very well might languish, alone and forgotten, for life. It is no accident that many state-funded asylums had graveyards on their ground.

In the words of Dr. Howard Fisher, Psychiatrist, Colorado Mental Health Institute at Pueblo:

"...the stigma of mental illness is the reason that early psychiatrists were called 'alienists' and their hospitals were placed at the edge of town (or outside it) in many cases. Patients generally lived their lives isolated from society, without family involvement or support. . . ."