

Chapter I - The Mender - Pefka Family

by Dorothy Gross (nee Mender) August 1996 and continued July 2025

I was born on January 2, 1932 in what was then Israel Zion Hospital in Boro Park, Brooklyn, New York. My parents: Abraham Mender and Eva Pefka were immigrants from Poland who arrived here at fairly young ages.

My father was one of four sons born to David and Duba Mender (nee Rosengarten) close to the turn of the century. European people of that era rarely knew their exact birth-dates. Records were destroyed during "Pogroms" and wars. It was common to hear that someone was born around Chanukah or Pesach. My father was born close to the High Holidays or so he said. He was the second eldest; the first being Joe. After my father came Mac and Irving. Irving, the youngest was the only one born in this country. The others were born in a small Polish town not far from Warsaw.



Avigdor Reuven and Toby (Papier)
Mendersistki

My grandmother had four pregnancies prior to these. The children did not survive. It was said they were girls (ed: 3 boys and 1 girl). When my uncle Joe was on his way, a doctor was in attendance. This was a first in the town's history. As he came into this world, the doctor literally breathed life into him. The townspeople dubbed him "Yosef Der Toiter" - Joseph the Dead One.

My grandfather was an unusually good husband. He was a *shochet* and earned a fine living. He was also very helpful at home. In later years, when my grandmother could barely see, my grandfather cooked and cleaned and ran an immaculate house. He and his family thrived for a time in Poland. As the first World War approached, townspeople including Hassidic family men were forced into the army. To avoid this, my grandfather swallowed Epsom salts and thereafter suffered from stomach maladies though he lived to a ripe old age of 85.

The family came to America just prior to World War I. On Ellis Island, the family name, Mendersitski was shortened to Mender. The family landed on a muddy Manhattan street, thus disproving what they had heard; that "in America, the streets were paved of gold".

They lived on the Lower East Side in a conventional tenement apartment (ed: at 64 Suffolk Street), but Zaidy continued to act as a Shochet and earned a very good living. They eventually moved to a two-family house in Boro Park, then considered an affluent neighborhood.

All four brothers attended "Yankev Yosef" Yeshiva through 8th grade, the common practice at that time. My father's memories of childhood are very happy ones. His mother and father were

very loving and never laid hands on their sons; most unusual in that era. All four were exceptionally good sons; devoted to their parents.

My father was a scamp and very sports-loving. As he grew up he got into the usual scrapes. His brother Joe was the serious one. Mac was handsome and very kind. Irving was the baby and could do no wrong.

My father told me stories of his childhood which remain with me to this day: Once he was almost trampled between the four legs of a horse while trying to catch a baseball.



Dubba (Rosengarten) and David Mender

After he finished school, he held a variety of jobs. After he met my mother he went to work for her father in the fur business; initially as an apprentice and eventually as a partner with my mother's brother, Louie. They remained partners for many years and just made a living. When business got worse, my father left. There were hard feelings and a period of hard times which I remember.

Then he spent a short time working with an ex-employee, Sydney, selling trimmings such as buttons & "Rick-Rack". Again, he bowed out but amicably. Eventually he went to work with my uncles Mac and Irving in hosiery. My uncle had a store called Topaz Hosiery and my uncle Irving was with him. The business was quite successful for a time. My father handled all bookkeeping. He was exceptional with figures and caught on quickly. Eventually a cheaper line from Asia sharpened the competition and he was forcibly retired with a pension and a gold watch. His relationship with my uncles, a special joy to me was never the same.

He took part-time jobs to keep busy. He spent a great deal of time raising money for his shul - Shomrei Emunah and for a variety of Yeshivas. He was a great Ba'al Tzedakah. The last year of his life he was sick with a bad heart and remained at home. He physically deteriorated. He died at the age of 82.



Eva (Pefka) and Abe Mender

My father's marriage to my mother Eva Pefka was interesting, to say the least. In all other aspects of life, I remember my father as aggressive and involved, hardly afraid to express his opinion. I remember him as tall. With my mother, he almost shrank and was quite hen-pecked. My mother was introverted and depressed. An infant son died of spinal meningitis 5 years before I was born. He was in a home as my mother-all of 19 had post-partum blues and never got over her guilt feelings.

She hovered over my sister and me and our slightest illness. She and my father did not talk my brother. It was painful. When my

son Ruby began a family tree, I could tell him nothing. It was he who found my brother's grave-site at Beth David which I now visit every Elul. His name was Irving.

To continue with my mother's family history, she was born three or four years later than my father, her birth-date even more uncertain. She was born to David Pievko and Chinka Ruchel Pievka (nee Zoika), also in a small town in Poland. The expression Lumza Gebernya (Lomza-born) was used. She was one of six. Older were Beresh, Jenny Louie and Irving; younger was Joe. Her childhood was sad and left it's mark on her. Her parents had been business people but times changed for the Jews in Poland prior to World War I. My mother remembered being sent to work for a wealthy family as a live-in maid. She was very unhappy and walked home a great distance in the snow to be greeted by my grandmother: "Oh! You're here!".

Eventually, my grandfather, very handsome and a bit of a Ne'er-do-well, left for America to earn his fortune and sent for my grandmother and the baby, Joe. I think that Irving must have gone as well. My mother hardly mentioned him. My grandfather became a successful furrier for a time. My grandmother left my mother ((then 9) her brother Louie (13) and Jenny (15) with Beresh, the eldest and married to be sent for as soon as possible.

World War I broke out in 1914 and lasted until 1918. They were trapped in Poland and Beresh's wife wouldn't care for them. Jenny was a seamstress and earned just about enough to keep them from starving.

My mother did not remember Germans - only anti-Semitic Poles. They rode into town on horseback and whipped at the children's bare feet. My mother described herself as sitting on her door-step wishing herself dead. She would never utter one word of Polish.

When the war ended, she was 13 and she and her siblings came to the United States. She had lost the bulk of her childhood. She had moments of depression and a very poor self-image. My father was persuaded to take my mother out by his father who was acquainted with her father and his yichis. She was a beauty and he was smitten. They were married in 1927 at the Broadway Central Hotel. Their marriage portrait hangs in my house to this very day.

My parents lived in Boro Park their entire lives save 1 year. When I was 1-year old, my father and uncle went bankrupt due to the depression. They moved to Easton, Pennsylvania and worked for a furrier for one year earning enough to begin again.

My uncle Beresh visited America and decided it wasn't frum enough and returned to Poland. When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, he, his wife and 3 of his 5 sons were killed. Two lived and went to Israel. One, Yaakov lives there still.

My uncle Irving was killed in a robbery in the fur shop shortly before my parents were married. The thieves saw him reach for the alarm and killed him.

My uncle Louie and my father were never friends again when the business partnership was dissolved. To make matters worse, my uncle Joe and his wife Anna carried tales of remarks made

by my father. This is highly unlikely knowing my father. My uncle Louie was furious and hung up when my mother called him. She was heart-broken. He was her favorite.

In spite of my protests, my mother called my uncle Joe and aunt Anna and there was an angry tirade over the phone. They never spoke again. After I married and had two children, my uncle Joe died. My aunt Anna never informed either my mother or her sister Jenny who found out well after shiva.

My uncle died of walking pneumonia while I was pregnant with my eldest, Cindy. My mother was afraid to tell me as I adored him. In spite of family disagreements, he attended my wedding. He left a wife, Madelene and a daughter Sylvia Helen. We kept in touch for a while, then lost touch. Ruby found my aunt in Mt. Kisco, N.Y. He spoke to her then I called. Her daughter is married and has children. She lives near them.

To the best of my knowledge, my aunt Anna is still living. Her son Abe is in Florida and I do not know the where-abouts of his sister Sheila.

My aunt Jenny passed away 1-1/2 years ago. She and my mother had a relationship all their lives. I am still in touch with her children, especially the eldest, Estelle Charton.

My grandfather, David Pefka lived into his 80's on the East Side. My grandmother died when I was 2. My grandfather re-married. My mother disliked his new wife and did not visit. He did visit us periodically. He was so that he ate only dairy in our house.

My grandfather David Mender died and was buried in Bnai Brok when my son Ruby was an infant. He had lived there very happily with a nephew for a number of years after my grandmother died.

My uncles Joe and Mac are gone. Mac's wife, Billy still lives in Great Neck. I keep in touch with her. Irving lives in Florida.

My parent's marriage endured with peculiar devotion. My mother was introverted and depressed; my father outgoing and gregarious. My mother did not attend family functions. I was her substitute. My father vacationed alone.

I was born 5 years after my brother's death. It took my mother 9-1/2 years until my sister Helene was born. We lived in Boro Park. I remember 1 apartment only - 3 rooms. My sister and I slept on cots in the living room. I was quiet and shy; a bookworm. My sister was a "Tomboy". We both attended public school. Yeshivas for girls were not prevalent then and my father could ill afford it. We did go to an excellent Hebrew school. We both graduated from Brooklyn College and became teachers.

My father died in 1985 and my mother 1-1/2 years later. He was ill. She was not but apparently could not live without him. They are both buried in Wellwood in Farmingdale.

Chapter I - The Gross - Lichtenstein Family

Irving Gross, my husband, was born on September 20, 1931 at Brooklyn Queens Hospital on Eastern Parkway. It no longer exists. He is one of a set of twins; the other being his sister Rozzy.



Itzik and Roz

The twins were born on Yom Kippur, as Kol Nidre was being chanted. His mother Bella (Lichtenstein) Gross, labored long and hard. Since only one heart-beat was heard because of their position noon knew before the birth. There was no sophisticated machinery in the 30's as there is today. First my father-in-law was told: "Louie, Louie, it's a boy!" then "Louie, Louie, it's a girl!". The babies weighed over seven pound each. There were two older siblings at home: Pearl, 3 and Moishe, 6.

Bella Lichtenstein was born in Meah She'arim, Israel in 1901 to Chaya and Meyer Lichtenstein. The other siblings included one brother: Zelig Hirsch and sisters: Rachel, Sara (who died in her 20's) Miriam and Pearl.

The marriage of Chaya and Meyer was a love match. My husband remembers his Bubby and Zaidy with great affection - kissing at each departure; never a cross word! Meyer died a young man during World War II. My husband's memory of him include "Zaidy, Zaidy" and his response: "Luhmer tantzin baidee" (Let's dance together) this is his response when his grandchildren call "Zaidy". Chaya passed away in the summer of 1957. I remember her as kindly, saintly and beautiful. My eldest daughter, Cindy, bears her name.

The Lichtenstein family in Meah She'arim was a well-known family of Talmiday Chochomim. Irving's forebears include Hillel Lichtenstein (The Kolomea Rav). He has two pages in the Jewish Encyclopedia devoted to him.



Chaya Lichtenstein and her children

My mother-in-law was very proud of her family heritage and always told her children: "Remember your roots!".

Meyer Lichtenstein came to the United States some ten years before he was able to send for his family. He struggled to make a living. In the meantime, World War I broke out.

In Israel, conditions were very bad. The Turks were on the side of the Germans and were cruel to the Jews. There was a locust infestation and a famine. People were starving. Bella contracted typhus and barely survived. Until the day she died, her memories of Israel were not pleasant. As a result, when Israel became a State and her husband wanted to see it, she resisted. After her first trip she said: "All of Israel has progressed except Meah She'arim

which is 40 years older".

Eventually, the war ended. Chaya and her daughters Rachel, Sara Miriam and Bella came to America. Zelig, grown with a family, remained in Israel. Pearl, the youngest, was born in the United States. She is still alive and lives in Israel with her husband, Shmuel. they have 10 daughters, 2 sons and a myriad of grandchildren - a prestigious clan, indeed.

The family settled in Brownsville. There, Bella met Louis Gross and married him. They had 4 children: Moishe - born in 1925, Pearl in 1928 and Rozzy & "Itzik" in 1931. All were raised and schooled in Brownsville. They had the boys schooled at Yeshiva Chayim Berlin and the girls in public school. All only got through high school Moishe did get s'micha from Chayim Berlin. My in-laws did not believe in a secular higher education. Torah-learning was their concern. Both Moishe and Itzik have Masters Degrees and are involved in education at present.

Louis' family history was quite different. He was born in 1899 "Dreg Amaredz" "Sibn Bergin" (7 Mountains) in what was then Romania but has been known to be Hungary at times. His parents were Yitchak Gross and Sarah (Majas) Gross. The only children his siblings know of are 2 brothers: Mattis and Avram Yosef and 4 sisters: Gertie, Chaya, Paulie and Esta Yudis. Gertie later made a tape for the family history which included other siblings unknown to us (Ed: Ida, Rochul, Mendel and twin boys)

Louis spoke little of his childhood. He was a thin, nervous man; rather quiet and inhibited. He was the only member of the family whom my mother-in-law was unable to fatten up. After her bout with famine, food was of prime importance. At about 18 years of age, he was drafted into the Austrian army (During World War I). He was on a train being shipped to the front which the British bombed. When he regained consciousness, he was surrounded by body parts. He deserted and eventually made his way to America (Ed: In 1921 by way of Paris) He had headaches every day of his life and his hands shook. He smoked like a chimney. One Pesach, Bella stole the Afikomen and would not return it until he promised to stop smoking. That he did.

Eventually, Louie's sisters came to America. Chaya and Paulie settled in Baltimore. Paulie's husband, Ignatz founded "European Kosher Salami". They were very wealthy and involved in the Yeshiva. They had no children. In later years, they settled in Bayit V'gaan. Chaya married a first cousin. They bought and ran the only kosher hotel in Bethlehem, New Hampshire, The Gross Arlington. The area was a



Louis Gross

haven to hay-fever sufferers prior to the advent of air-conditioning. The hotel still exists as the Arlington; run by Mrs. Strolowitz who bought it from Chaya over 20 years ago. Gertie settled in New York and raised 3 children: Jack, Dina and Irene. Mattis survived World War II in Europe and came here later. I remember him as a fat, jolly man with a white beard; very friendly. He worked in a well-known deli on Delancey Street called "88"

Avrom Yosef came here well into the sixties. He lived in Boro Park for a time and then settled in B'nai Brok. They have all passed away.

Bella and Louis had a rather stormy marriage. Their lifestyle included picking at each other, rather like a tennis match. I believe they truly cared for each other in their own ways.

Louie worked at a myriad of jobs. He'd begin on Monday and get fired on Friday as soon as Shabbos came up. Times were different. Eventually, he started his own business. He sold dry goods and had a store on Prospect Place in Brownsville. He owned the building which the store was part of. He always did well, even during the depression. He was rather tight with the dollar and at odd times, Bella would work to earn extra money for a fur coat, for example. When Brownsville became a disintegrating slum, he sold the building and the store. Bella and he moved to East New York. He went into the quilting business with partners.

Eventually, he retired and they moved to Boro Park where they spent their last years. He was somewhat senile and forgetful at the end.

When Bella died in 1977, Louis was unable to care for himself. He went into a senior citizen facility and received excellent care and very frequent family visits. He died in 1981 of pneumonia. Bella is buried in Mt Hebron Cemetery, in New York, near her family as per her request. Louis is buried on Har Ha'mnuchot in Jerusalem as per his request. My husband accompanied his body to Israel. He sat shiva at the home of his uncle, Avrom Yosef, in B'nai Brok.

Moishe, the eldest, married Rivka Rosenberg of Philadelphia. They were married over 40 years and had 4 children: Meyer, Shainee, Zalmee and Yankee. He now has 22 grandchildren and 5 great grandchildren. Rivka passed away some years ago and Moishe is happily re-married to Rochelle. After a varied career he is now a guidance counselor in the Philadelphia school system.

Pearl married Eli Elefant. They have 3 sons: Meyer, Moishe and David and 1 daughter: Suri. Eli is a practicing rabbi. They have lived in Levittown, New Jersey, Plymouth Massachusetts, Clarksburg, West Virginia and Laurelton, New York. He became a school teacher in the New York City public schools after he moved to Laurelton. He then became a part-time rabbi. He retired from the Board of Education but is still a rabbi in Kew Garden Hills where they live. David is married and has 4 children. Suri is married and has 3.

Rozzy is married to Fred Katz and lives in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Fred has his own insurance company and Roz was his secretary. He retired a few years ago and his son-in-law took over. They have 3 daughters: Kali, in Israel she has 4 children; Sandy in Manhattan with 2 and Dina in Brooklyn with 5.

Chapter III - The Grosses

The result of these 2 family sagas was the marriage of Dotty and Irving Gross on June 7, 1955 at the Milrose Chateau, in Brooklyn.

We met in the Brooklyn Ice Palace where Wednesday night was Yeshiva night. A friend, Marcia Chutter, introduced us. While Irving skated, I fell and tried again. We courted for several months and then became engaged in October and married in June.

Irving became a cantor. His first position was Watertown, New York - charming but cold and very snowy. We spent 2 years there. We then moved to Colchester, Connecticut for a brief time and then to Willimantic, Connecticut, where Cindy was born on January 28, 1958. Ruby and Ruthie were both born in Plainfield, New Jersey - Ruby on March 5, 1960 and Ruthie on October 20, 1962. We lived in Plainfield for 5 years and bought our first house there; a ten room, 100-year-old house. Irving was handy and did much work there. We then moved to Vineland, New Jersey and finally Trenton. There, I went back to teaching at the Yeshiva, as a social studies and English teacher. There we bought our second home for the magnificent sum of \$8,500.

While in New Jersey, my husband made a wooden board to extend the back seat of the car. we'd visit our folks in New York, Sundays, dress the kids in PJ's and put them to sleep. We drove home and transferred them to their beds. The board was dubbed "The Sleeping Board".

With Marcia's help, I got a job at Hillel Yeshiva in Lawrence and my husband a part-time job as a cantor at the Laurelton Community House. He worked for Metropolitan Life Insurance.

Eventually, he left the full-time cantorate but still davens Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

We moved to Bayswater in 1973. Itzik had a variety of selling jobs. He completed his education acquiring both his Bachelor's and Master's degrees and went to work for the Board of Education in 1985. I left the Yeshiva and joined him in 1987.

Our children were all married while we lived in Bayswater - Cindy to Jack Margareten on June 7, 1977; Ruthie to Joey Weinreich on February 21, 1985 and Ruby to Laurie Abramson on June 16, 1985.

We sold our house in Bayswater and bought a condo town-house in Long Beach and moved in June 1994.

At present, we are proud Bubby and Zaidy of 5 granddaughters and 5 grandsons - the latest additions being twin grandsons. We still work for the Board of Ed. We own a 27 foot motor home dubbed "Bubby's and Zaidy's Mishigas". We travel summer December and February -

Not the end - just the beginning...

Continued July 2025

The years have flown by like the blink of an eye. I am 93 years old. Irving and I spent the next years of our lives retired in Deerfield Beach, Florida, in a retirement village. I think it was the perfect spot for us. I became active in the Young Israel and got to play a role in building our

magnificent building which is now the second largest YI in the United States. Both Irving and I were active in our own ways. We made loads of friends.

Our family grew too. All our children married and had families. At this stage, Irving passed away 17 years ago. His family remembers him very fondly. I have ten grandchildren and 19 great grandchildren. I have gone on to the next phase of my life and live in an independent living facility up North. I look forward to a fall with simchas: the marriage of my granddaughter Stephanie. I also look forward to the birth of twin great granddaughters to be born to my grandson Jonathan and his wife Fiona..Roz, Irving's twin ,just passed away and I so look forward to the new twins.

I am content being up North again with my family and look forward to sharing simchas with them. I have a wonderful family .

I am so lucky..Thank you Ha Shem.