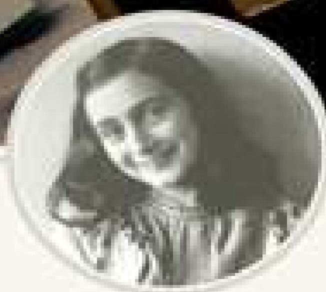

TREASURES FROM THE ATTIC

THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF ANNE FRANK'S FAMILY

MIRJAM PRESSLER

Treasures from the Attic

THE EXTRAORDINARY
STORY OF ANNE FRANK'S FAMILY

Mirjam Pressler with Gerti Elias

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN
BY DAMION SEARLS

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Publisher’s Note

In 2001, as described in the Afterword, a cache of several thousand letters, photographs, and oth documents was found in the attic of the house in Basel belonging to Buddy Elias, Anne Frank cousin. It was soon realized that these documents were of major significance for the history of t Frank family, and cast a new and clearer light on Anne Frank herself. These papers, organized a edited by Buddy Elias’s wife, Gerti Elias—including both previously published letters and documen and some that have never been published—form the basis of the following family history. Mirja Pressler, who wrote the chronicle that contains them, is the German translator of the Definiti Edition of Anne Frank’s diary and a winner of the German Book Prize in 2006 for her literary life work.

In the German edition, letters are quoted exactly as written, without modernizing the Germa orthography, correcting spelling mistakes, or filling in abbreviations; punctuation is added for clari in a few places, and obvious typos in typewritten letters are corrected, but the edition aims to preser the authentic feel of the personal documents. These features have been carried over as much possible into the English translation.

Prologue

Sils-Maria, in the Upper Engadine valley in Switzerland—a summer day, 1935. A slim, well-dresse man leaves Hotel Waldhaus, where he has met with an executive of the Pomosin company to report o the progress of their Amsterdam office. The man walks briskly up the road that runs right through th middle of the forest and in a few minutes reaches Villa Laret.

As he steps out from between the trees, it lies before him, in the middle of a parklike field fille with trees, more like a little castle than a villa. The windows are so clean and scrubbed that they flas in the sun.

The man walks up the wide, well-raked gravel road. He smiles when he catches sight of the swin hanging between two tall trees—a wide platform with a railing, big enough to comfortably fit a tab and chairs. Two children are jumping up and down on the platform at the moment, making it start t swing. They are laughing and screaming. Two dachshunds hop around under the swing, yappin excitedly, but no matter how hard they try, they can't manage to jump onto the swing; sometimes dog falls onto its back in its failed attempt and flails around kicking its short legs until it turns rig side up, then it starts trying again to jump up onto the swing. The children double over with laughte The boy is about ten years old, the girl six.

"Not so loud!" the man shouts at the children.

They both stop for a moment. "Daddy, do you know what Auntie O. said this morning?" the gi screams. He steps closer and shakes his head. "Yesterday she asked her maid where her washclo was, in French of course, and then she wanted Aunt Leni to tell her the German word for i '*Waschlappen,*' Aunt Leni said. And then this morning, she said to her maid: 'Where is my *wasc lapin*?' " The children giggled. "Get it, Daddy? She asked where her wash-rabbit was. Isn't th funny?"

He nods. "Yes, that really is funny. But don't make so much noise, so you don't disturb all th ladies and gentlemen."

They both nod. Then they take each other's hands and start playing again, only the slightest b quieter than before. The children are Buddy Elias and his cousin Anne Frank, and the man is Ot Frank, taking a holiday with his younger daughter at Villa Laret.

About a dozen ladies and gentlemen are sitting on the terrace, at tables covered with porcelain cup and dishes, the ladies with broad-brimmed hats and parasols. The gentlemen, who presumably do n dare to take off their jackets despite the hot weather, are wearing straw summer hats. In any case, th heat is more bearable here, in the middle of the forest, than up on the treeless mountain slopes.

Next to the wide double doors that lead to the salon, two maids with little white aprons an matching white lace caps are standing next to the serving cart that holds the tea and coffee pots an plates loaded with petits fours and cakes, ready to hurry over and serve any guest who signals f them.

Villa Laret, Sils-Maria (photo credit prl.1)

Otto Frank walks closer. When the lady of the house sees him and waves at him, he takes off his h
and makes a bow.

The lady of the house is Olga Spitzer née Wolfsohn, a French cousin of Leni Elias and Otto Fran
Every summer she spends a few weeks at her villa in Sils-Maria, a large house with ninete
bedrooms, and she always invites guests to join her. Leni and her mother, Alice Frank, are usuall
among them, since the family connections are so close. This year Otto has come too from Amsterdar
with his daughter Anne but without his wife, Edith, who went with Margot, the older daughter, to s
Edith's mother in Aachen.

Olga Spitzer offers her cousin Otto her hand, and he bends down to kiss it. Then he greets h
mother, Alice, and sister, Leni, with affectionate kisses on the cheek before sitting down at their tabl

"Did the meeting go well?" Leni asks. In French, of course, since it would be rude to speak Germa
in front of Olga Spitzer, who understands just a few words of the language.

Otto Frank nods. "Yes, very well. It is much easier to do business with someone when he is o
vacation. He agreed to everything I suggested."

Meanwhile, the children have come closer, curious. But the adult conversation does not intere
them. They each grab a little cake.

"What should we do now?" Buddy asks, chewing.

"I know," Anne says, and she pulls her cousin into the house, through the salon and the hall, up th
wide staircase, and into their grandmother Alice's room. "You promised," she says, and points to th
armoire. When Buddy violently shakes his head, she insists: "You said you wouldn't chicken out."

Buddy shrugs his shoulders. He knows that there's no point in trying to defend himself. When Ann
gets something into her head, she doesn't let go of the idea very easily. And the fact is, he did lose th
bet: she had dared to clamber up the tree after all, get a bird's egg from its nest, and come down wi
the egg in the pocket of her skirt, without breaking it. Then, despite his warning, she climbed back u
and put the egg back again.

"Come on, do it," Anne says. She sits down in the armchair and tucks her legs under her.

Buddy wipes his sticky hands on his pants, hesitantly opens the armoire, and takes out a black dres
His grandmother Alice always wears only black dresses. This one has a white lace insert. He pulls
over his shirt and pants, takes a shawl, winds it tight around his waist, and then stuffs two small so
pillows down the lace neck of the dress. Anne giggles with recognition. He looks at himself in the b
mirror next to the armoire. The game is starting to be fun for him too.

He takes a hat with a bouquet of flowers on it out of a hatbox, puts it on, and stands in front of th
mirror plucking at the veil until he has it hanging rakishly over one eye. The shoes with the high hee

are too big, so he stuffs handkerchiefs into the toes and then prances around in front of the gleef Anne, who laughs so loud that a maid comes in to see what is going on. The girl, quite young herse applauds. Buddy, inspired by the effect he is having, lets himself be carried away by the game ar starts making even broader gestures—elegantly pursing his lips, jutting out his pinkie and bringing a imaginary teacup to his mouth, then wiping off his pursed lips with an equally imaginary napkin. The he offers Anne his hand, exactly as elegant and refined as Olga Spitzer when she had given Otto Fran her hand earlier, and Anne gives it a noisy wet kiss.

“Come on, go downstairs and show everyone,” she demands, but that is too much for Buddy. H doesn’t dare to in this distinguished house. Back home in Basel he would have done it just like tha He takes off the clothes, and the maid puts everything back into the armoire where it belongs. Sh takes the handkerchiefs he had stuffed into the shoes, to wash and iron them.

“What should we do now?” Buddy asks.

“Hide-and-seek,” Anne suggests, even though it’s a little boring with only two people. But the have thought up some new rules: the seeker has to wait longer, and if he doesn’t find the hider, then h loses and has to pay a penalty, for example, giving the winner his dessert.

They run out through the garden to the forest. “You’re it,” Anne says. “I was it yesterday.”

Buddy agrees. He crouches down under a tree and hides his face in his arms.

Anne doesn’t run far—she already knows where she’ll hide. During the game yesterday, sh discovered a little cavity in the hillside, maybe an abandoned fox hole. She tears off a few branche crawls into the opening, and pulls the branches over the entrance. Soon she hears Buddy shout th he’s ready. He goes past her more than once, but of course he doesn’t see her. She knew that th hiding place would be perfect. Hopefully, it really is abandoned; hopefully, a fox won’t come and bi her in the behind. Or is it really a fox hole? Maybe it’s a rabbit hole, for a *lapin*? She suppresses h laughter as she remembers what Auntie O. had said that morning. Rabbits don’t bite, at least she ha never heard of anyone being bitten by a rabbit, but foxes have sharp noses and sharp teeth.

Anne Frank in Sils-Maria, 1935 (photo credit prl.2)

Buddy, meanwhile, has gotten quite nervous. Of course he can’t find Anne, she has a special talen for hiding. But eventually it’s time for her to come out. “I give up!” he shouts. “Anne, come out!” Sh

doesn’t appear, and he shouts louder and louder, runs faster and faster. What if she’s lost? What if strange man found her and took her? How could he explain to his mother, his grandmother, and Uncl Otto that it wasn’t his fault? He can already hear his mother say: But Buddy, you’re much older tha she is, it’s up to you to be more careful.

He is desperate and close to tears when suddenly she is standing next to him. “I want your desse when we have ice cream,” she says.

Buddy would rather give her a punch in the nose. Or a kiss, because he’s so relieved. But he onl says: “Look at you, you’re all filthy.”

It’s true. Anne’s light summer dress is smeared with dirt, and she tries to knock off the clumps o soil, but it’s wet and the stains only get bigger. “Don’t worry,” Buddy says, plucking a few twigs ou of her hair, “Alice is so happy you’re here, I’m sure she won’t yell at you for long.”

“It’s a brand-new dress,” Anne says.

They start back, a bit dejected. “I could say I fell,” Anne suggests.

“You fell on your back and fell again on your front?” Buddy asks. He feels sorry for his cousin.

But in the end it’s not so bad. “Look at you!” Alice cries, shocked, when she sees Anne, and Ott asks if she’s hurt herself. And Leni goes after Buddy for not looking after his little cousin bette Buddy stands there completely flabbergasted and turns red under the curious gaze of all the guests.

Olga Spitzer, Auntie O., saves the situation by calling her maid and telling her to clean the girl.

“But not with the wash-fox!” Buddy says. “Use the wash-*lapin*.”

A couple of ladies raise their brows in surprise. But Anne smiles again.

After dinner it turns out there is ice cream for dessert. Anne empties her bowl and then shoves over to Buddy without anyone else noticing, and he fills it up again with his. Then he sighs, but on very quietly, so that no one will notice that either.

The grown-ups are talking about a concert that will happen tomorrow, in the house. The Trio o Trieste will perform. Concerts take place here all the time; Olga Spitzer loves music and is ric enough to pay for private concerts for herself and her guests. Leni said once that no one speaks money in this house, that the word does not exist in Olga’s vocabulary, and that that in itself is th best proof of Olga’s wealth.

The sun goes down behind the mountains. The ladies and gentlemen return to the salon, the childre are sent to bed, and in the distance the bells toll the hours of the night.

PART ONE

Alice Frank née Stern, Anne's Grandmother

(1865–1953)

Alice Frank with her mother, Cornelia Stern née Cahn, circa 1872

(photo credit p01.1)

1.

Many Good and Beautiful Things

BASEL, 1935

Alice leans against the window, her arm resting on the windowsill, and looks out onto the street evening falling in the city. She loves the dusk, the blue hour between day and night, and always has. man is turning the corner: it's the Italian man who lives in the basement of the house kitty-corner hers, and he is hauling a sack of either coal or potatoes, she can't tell anymore in the twilight. But sh sees the door of the house fly open and two children rush out, a boy and a girl, and she sees the ma put his sack down when he catches sight of the children and spread out his arms to catch them an tumble them around, first the girl and then the boy. It's a little painful for her to watch. That's ho Michael caught up his children when he came home, and they loved it, screaming and shrieking much as those two on the other side of the street, whose delighted voices she can hear even throug the closed window here on the third floor.

She turns around, stands with her back against the window, and her eye falls on the large ov painting in the heavy gilded frame hanging on the opposite wall. She contemplates the little girl sh once was and wonders if she ever greeted her father like that when she was a child. Probably no August Stern was a sober and serious man, and Alice's governess had always spoken of him with lowered voice and deep respect. Alice cannot imagine that he ever once tumbled a child around in h arms.

She can no longer see the girl in the painting very clearly, but that doesn't matter, she knows th girl so well that she can see her even with her eyes closed, she doesn't need to turn on the light. Sh isn't sure anymore how old she was back when Professor Schlesinger painted her in Frankfurt. Mayb four or five, she couldn't have been much older than that. And when the governess pushed her throug the door, he would have said, "There's my shweet little girl!" since in Frankfurt all little girls wer "shweet." But his cajoling voice and the smile he put on couldn't fool her, she knew how quickly h would turn mean if she didn't keep as still as he wanted her to. His face with its brown goatee wou twist into a grimace, and his voice would lose its cajoling tone. Alice can hear it even now, this har voice brusquely reprimanding her, and can feel the smell of paint and turpentine mixed with pip tobacco in her nose sixty-five years later, and how she was seized by a longing to get back to h nursery, which rises up before her eyes perfectly clearly, as though she were seeing it in real life: th dolls, the dolls' kitchen with a stove you could turn on, a dining table with real porcelain dishes on i she sees the bookshelf with all the fairy tales—had *Struwwelpeter* even been published back then Yes, of course, she can still hear her governess's voice reading her the story of the boy who wouldn eat his soup—she sees her four-poster bed, like heaven with its clouds of tulle, sees the window wi its white lace drapes and the green velvet curtains tied back during the day with gilded ropes.

She can still hear the governess come in and say, "Come along now, Alice, it's time," how sh would untie Alice's apron and take off her play clothes, tear the doll from her hand despite her franti efforts to hold on to it, and put her finger on her lips when Alice began to cry: "Shhh, Mama has headache, you don't want to make Mama sicker, do you? You're a big girl now."

Even now it frightens her to think about it. Later, when she had children herself, she winced even

time the expression “You don’t want to …, do you?” unintentionally escaped her lips, and she wou
try, ~~confused, to find other words. Back then, when she was a child, “You don’t want to …, do~~ you?
had worked on her like a magic spell to break her resistance, like a mysterious potion that paralyze
her. Little Alice let herself be dressed in the white undergarments with the frilly flounces, the pi
slip that was so starched it rustled when she moved, and then the fine lace dress with a sash of th
same pink color. She had gotten the dress only a few weeks earlier, because her old Sunday dres
which had been much more comfortable, was now too small for her—the pretty sky blue bodice w
so tight that the governess could no longer hook it closed. Mother had ordered the fabric, sought o
the lace, and summoned the seamstress, who in any case was at their house quite often. A redheade
freckled woman from the Odenwald, she had sewn all day until the new dress was finally finished.

Alice Frank as a child, painted by a Frankfurt painter,
Professor Schlesinger, circa 1869 (photo credit 1.1)

Alice smiles at the painting, a shweet girl, and for a moment she thinks she can feel the whi
stockings, the gray kid-leather little boots a bit too tight. Strange, how precisely she remembe
everything to do with this painting; maybe it is because she has looked at it all her life, longer tha
anything else, longer even than the pieces of furniture she had brought with her two years ago whe
she moved from Frankfurt to Basel. It had hung first in her parents’ drawing room, then, after th

terrible day when she lost her father and had to give up her familiar home and move into h ~~grandfather's house, in her mother Cornelia's room, then after Cornelia's death in her own house~~, fir in Frankfurt, Jordanstrasse 4,[1] and now here in Basel, Schweizergasse 50. When she thinks abo herself as a child, she always sees herself looking the way she looks in this painting.

Little Alice had hated being led in to Professor Schlesinger like that. She knew she would have t stand still, not move her feet even if her legs became stiff and started to hurt, not turn her head to loo at a fly, that it was just as forbidden to scratch anywhere if it itched. She had always looked fo excuses not to see the professor, but the governess had insisted. "You don't want Papa to have spen all that money for nothing, do you?" No, of course she didn't want that, Papa had to work hard for h money. Every morning he put his hat on his head and set out to the office, and sometimes, when th weather was so bad that you wouldn't turn a dog out in such a storm, he sighed.

The evening grows dimmer, the shadows rise up in the corners of the room, the hard handle of th window presses against her back, but Alice stays standing, motionless, even if the painting gradual blurs before her eyes and only a few bright patches remain visible. The older she gets, the closer th past seems to her and the more clearly images from her memory that she thought were forgotten ri up before her. She thinks about the sentence her grandfather had spoken so often, "The less futu someone has, the more the present loses its meaning," and she smiles at the thought that she ha always taken this for idle chatter, the meaningless talk of an old man who doesn't know what he saying anymore, because what would that mean, life without future? Back then, everything was th future, the whole world, and at least half her thoughts started with "When I grow up . . ." But now?

This might be the moment when an idea comes to her—first vague, then clearer; first a "Maybe then a "Why not?" and finally a "Yes, that would be good." She goes straight to the light switc squints in the sudden brightness, turns back to the window, pulls the heavy curtains shut, and in a fe quick steps is at her desk, also brought from Frankfurt. She flips open the desk, pulls open a drawe takes out a black bound notebook, picks up her glasses, and sits down in the armchair. Now she know what she has to do, and she is relieved that she thought of it in time. It is like an assignment that w given to her some time in the past and that she only now understands. She will write up her life stor for her sons, Robert, Otto, and Herbert, and her daughter, Leni—she will write a letter and give it t them next week when they all come to celebrate her seventieth birthday.

Zum 20ten Dezember 1935.

Wenn ich Euch, meine lieben Kinder, die ich nach langer Zeit wieder um mich versammelt sehe, heute an meinem 70ten Geburtstag einen ganz kurzen Einblick & Rückblick in mein Jugendleben geben will, so braucht Ihr nicht zu befürchten, dass dies mit einer besonderen Absicht geschieht. Es ist mir nur ein Bedürfnis Euch ein bleibendes Andenken an diesen Tag zu geben. –

Wie wenig wissen doch Kinder im Allgemeinen von der Jugendzeit der Eltern. Die Enkel können sich noch weniger einen Begriff machen, dass wir jung waren, wie sie es jetzt sind. Erst viel später wird ihnen diese Erkenntnis kommen & sie werden dann Vieles verstehen & begreifen können. – Selbst die erwachsenen Kinder wissen meist nur das, was sie als denkende Menschen vor sich gesehen & mit erlebt haben. –

Euer Vater hat Euch allerdings des öfteren von seiner Kindheit & Jugend in dem grossen Familienkreis in dem lieben alten Haus in Landau erzählt. Dort ist die

Facsimile of Alice Frank’s letter dated December 20, 1935 (photo credit 1.2)

Verehrung für die Eltern, die geschwisterliche Liebe die erste
Bedingung für das schöne & innige Zusammenleben gewesen.
Das Schicksal jedes Einzelnen wurde gemeinschaftlich getragen &
jede Freude geteilt. —
Meine Kindheit bewegte sich in ganz anderen Bahnen. Als
einziges Kind meiner Eltern, die Mutter meist leidend,
lernte ich schon früh die Schattenseiten des Lebens kennen.
Es wäre jedoch nicht der Wahrheit entsprechend wenn ich
sagen wollte, dass ich meine Kindheit als eine traurige
empfunden hätte, aber allzu freudig ist sie mir nicht
im Gedächtnis geblieben. Durch die innige Liebe meiner
Mutter wurde ich für viel Trauriges entschädigt.
Die schwere Natur & der Hang zum Grübeln ist bis
auf den heutigen Tag an mir haften geblieben & liess
mich erst in reiferen Jahren erkennen dass ich auch
viel Gutes & Schönes zu verzeichnen habe wofür ich
dankbar sein muss. — Im Hause meines Onkels, des
so sehr geschätzten Arztes, Dr. Bernhard Stern, fand ich was
ich zu Hause vermisste, stets frohe Laune & durch die

Facsimile of Alice Frank's letter dated December 20, 1935 (photo credit 1.3)

This time it won't be a poem—nothing cheerful, none of the usual allusions or inside jokes that call forth an understanding smile from the adults and a titter from the children, who of course know the family language perfectly well. This time it will be something to remind her descendants of her when she is no longer there, something to connect her children to a past that was her past too and that she has lost as a result of these barbaric Nazis. For who knows if she will ever get back what she has lost. Sometimes Alice no longer believes that the world will ever be the same again, the way it was—the dark clouds on the horizon are too threatening. In this weather you wouldn't turn a dog out of the house, she thinks, without smiling. She unscrews the inkwell, takes up her pen, dips it in the ink, and begins to write:

December 20th, 1935[2]

My dear children, gathered here around me after such a long time apart, on this, my 70th birthday—If I have decided to give you a very short look back & into my childhood life, there is no reason to fear any hidden motives. It is only that I feel a need to give you a permanent, lasting token of our time together today.—

Most children know so little about their parents' youth! And grandchildren are even less able to imagine that we were once young like them. Only much later do they realize it, & there is a lot they can understand & comprehend only then. Even adult children usually know only what they have seen and understood in person, & what they have lived through themselves.—

Granted, your father told you many stories about his childhood & youth with his large family in the beloved old house in Landa Respect for one's elders and brotherly love laid the groundwork there for a beautiful & devoted life together. The fate of ever individual was borne as a group, & every joy and celebration was shared.—

Yes, the house is beautiful, Alice thinks with a certain melancholy, even if it did always strike he as a bit run-down. It was built in the Middle Ages and used to be a postal station, a lodge for ma carriages, horses, and travelers, but after 1855, when the Neustadt–Landau railway line was open and then soon extended to Weissenburg, there were no more postal carriages and the owner of "Zu Blum" gave it up. That is how Zacharias Frank, Michael's father, could buy it for his family in 187 Of course Michael was already nineteen years old then, so he didn't live there for long. Zachari Frank, whose father, Abraham, had come as a private tutor from Fürth to Niederhochstadt, about si miles from Landau, moved to the city in 1841 after obtaining a license as an iron dealer. He had run good business, started lending out money, and become a banker of sorts. Alice had never met him; h died the year before she was married. He and his wife, Babette, had nine children: four sons and fiv daughters. Michael was the sixth child, and Babette was quite worried about him because he was pa thirty and still not married. So she was ecstatic when Michael and Alice got engaged. The who family welcomed Alice with open arms.

The Frank/Loeb house in Landau-in-der-Pfalz (photo credit 1.4)

It was strange for Alice at first, all these people who talked too loud, laughed too loud, wanted to much from her, brought her so close. She would have preferred to hang back, go for walks alone wi Michael; she would have been happy to be left in peace to organize her thoughts. But that was out the question. No sooner had she sat down somewhere with a piece of needlework—she always broug some needlework with her when she visited the family in Landau, as something to cling to—than sister-in-law would come up to her, an aunt, a cousin by marriage, a neighbor, or even her mother-in law, to drag her away at the top of their lungs and with an eagerness incomprehensible to her, to joi them in some housework or in the kitchen, in a walk to the market, in a visit to a friend.

Babette, her mother-in-law, was a friendly, good-natured woman who liked to eat and ate a lo cried a lot, and laughed even more. But she was strong willed too, had raised nine children and ke

the large house running smoothly despite her age. This woman, who at the time was probably young than Alice herself is today, never understood how Alice could not know how to cook, how she ha never learned and wasn't trying to learn. "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach," she sa once, before the wedding, and when Alice answered, "We always had a cook, and she did all th cooking," Babette shook her head in disbelief and cast a sympathetic glance at her son Michael. Onc Alice heard one of the sisters-in-law whisper to another: "Michael's bride is too delicate to get h hands dirty." It hurt her feelings, but she pretended she hadn't heard anything.

The children of Zacharias and Babette Frank (photo credit 1.5)

No, it wasn't easy for Alice to get used to this family back then, but she knew exactly what w expected of a good daughter-in-law and conformed to the expectations. And as the years went by, sh learned to appreciate the friendly warmth of the Franks and understand that what she had thought w an uncultivated racket actually expressed vitality and affection, what at first had seemed li meddlesome curiosity later proved to be heartfelt sympathy.

Alice smiles. She dips the pen in the ink and keeps writing:

My childhood followed a very different course. As an only child, and with Mother so often ill, I got to know the darker shadows of l at a young age. It would not be entirely true to say that I felt my childhood to be a sad one, but it does not remain in my memory particularly happy. The devoted love of my mother was compensation for much sadness. A grave nature & a tendency to brood h stuck with me to this day, & only in my mature years have I come to recognize that I also have many good & beautiful things record, and which I should be thankful for.—

This tendency to brood is a heavy burden: even today she has to fight against a certain melancho disposition that she was probably born with; even today she has to make an effort to perceive t "good & beautiful things" that she mentions here. She was never able to just take life as it comes a enjoy herself. Michael was completely different that way, and she learned a lot living at his side, ma up for a lot of the pleasures that were perhaps missing from her childhood. Not only was he quite a b older than she, and so more mature and experienced, but he also possessed an easygoing naturalne and openness to the world that amazed her again and again. It was he who taught her how to enjoy t

pleasures of the lighter side of life, and with him, with his death, part of her own pleasure in life ha
died too.

The handwriting on the paper starts to blur. Does she wipe her eyes with a handkerchief? It's bee
twenty-six years that Michael has been gone, for twenty-six years she has been a widow, but still sh
has never fully gotten over it. Of course it doesn't burn as painfully as it did at the beginning, but
dull ache has never stopped boring into her; sometimes it flares up, and even now she probably think
with every decision she has to make, What would Michael say about that? What would he do in th
situation?

*When I moved in with my uncle, the very highly regarded physician Dr. Bernhard Stern, I found what I had been missing in my o
house—a constant good mood & lots of loving company from the cousins and the two sons of my dear aunt Lina Steinfeld.*

The connection with Bernhard Stern, the older brother of her father, August, and with the rest of th
Stern family had played a large role in her childhood and youth, and was not broken off later. H
cousin Klara (whom everyone called Klärchen), three years older than she was; Richard, the same ag
as she; and Karl, six years younger, to some degree took the place of the brothers and sisters she nev
had and always wanted, and then there were Emil and Paul too, the sons of her aunt Lina, her father
and uncle's sister. How gladly Alice accepted every invitation from the Sterns in those years, and ho
happy were the hours she spent with them. She felt closer to this side of her family than to the oth
side, the ones in her grandfather Elkan Juda Cahn's house, where she lived after the death of h
father. At the Sterns' she was introduced to the kind of cheerful family life that always failed t
materialize at home with her ailing mother.

*We spent our happiest hours there, because my dear grandmother Helene Stern lived there too, and every day all six grandchildre
flocked around her in her cozy little room.*[3] *This brave woman, who with the work of her own two hands gave three children and tw
stepsons the opportunity to study & make a name for themselves, was duly honored & loved. We rushed to bring her all our lit
cares & worries and always found loving consolation and understanding there. Everyone was very happy to see my mother too wh
she visited.—*

It was this friendly woman, Helene Stern, who bolstered up the thirteen-year-old Alice after th
sudden death of her father and the total collapse of her mother. She said that we have to submit to fa
but that it is also important to get back up after every blow, just as the grass straightens back up after
storm; and she talked about courage, about trusting your own strength. Even now, Alice can hear he
grandmother's voice telling her: "You are still so young. Youth fights and overcomes, age waits an
undergoes."

Alice sees before her eyes this woman with white hair under a little black bonnet, sees her sma
sitting room, which never really got enough light because it extended to the back of the house, and th
dark furniture, including the glass cabinet with the Hanukkah menorah, the silver kiddush cup that w
used only on the high holy days, and the long-stemmed glasses that were used almost as rarely. Alic
almost never saw Grandmother Helene without a piece of sewing in her hand—there was alway
something that needed patching, darning, or repairing. "Hard work is its own reward" was another
her sayings that Alice never forgot. Silly proverbs often turn out to be wise truths, she thinks now, an
you sometimes have to pay a high price to learn that. She dips her pen in the ink and continu
writing. Aside from the scratching of the steel nib across the paper, and the ticking of the clock, all
silent.

In my 13th year we moved to my grandfather Elkan Juda Cahn's house. A lot changed in my life from that point on. Demands we

made on me that were probably too great for my understanding, what understanding there was, which in any case left a lot to b desired. The main duty and responsibility that the family placed on my shoulders—to be a support for my mother—was difficult f me. I have borne this feeling of responsibility for her my whole life & gladly too.—

Perhaps Alice feels thirsty at this point. She gets up, fetches a glass of water, and drinks it in lon slow swallows, then sits back down at her writing desk, props up her arms, takes her head in her hand and gives herself over to her memories.

Her father's death, which struck her out of the clear blue sky, brought far-reaching changes. H mother, Cornelia, moved with Alice into her own father Elkan Juda Cahn's house on Hochstrass Cornelia's mother, Betty, had passed away long before Alice was born. Cornelia's weakened state o health certainly did not improve after this blow of fate: she was tormented with migraines and ha such a weak constitution that she often had to take to her bed for days or weeks at a time. Alic suffered, and she had to admit to herself sometimes that she would have been very glad to have different mother, more lively, more active, better able to give her some support in this new and ofte difficult environment. One who could have joined her on hiking trips in the Taunus, like the ones sh heard about from her friends from time to time, instead of, at best, sometimes taking her to th Palmengarten in Frankfurt to feed the ducks in the lake. Of course she would have quickly shove such thoughts aside at the time and berated herself for being a bad, ungrateful daughter. She loved h mother above all else, and when Cornelia took her into her arms and hugged her close, Alice coul have cried with joy. Cornelia was a wonderful mother. So what if she didn't go on any hiking trips an rarely went out to see people, Alice had friends of her own. It was Cornelia who taught her daught needlework and lace making, who showed her how to design a pattern and create sumptuo embroidery. It was also Cornelia who read books with her and told her stories.

Alice raises her head and contemplates the small, oval picture hanging over her desk: a colorize photograph of Cornelia as a little girl, four years old at most. A sweet child, still with baby fat and much too serious face, a child who seems to look out at the world with suspicious eyes. You can see i this child, into whose chubby little baby hands the photographer had pressed a tendril of ivy and couple of blue flowers, someone who shrinks back in fear from life. Only in her later years, when sh was already a grandmother herself, did Cornelia grow stronger. Alice's gaze wanders to the larg photograph hanging on the other wall: Cornelia as an older woman, in her severe widow's clothin Cornelia still had the same serious look that she had as a little girl.

Alice Frank’s mother, Cornelia Stern née Cahn, as a child, circa 1844 (photo credit 1.6)

Cornelia was a good grandmother who was proud of her grandchildren and spoiled them and d everything she could for them. She adored Robert, Otto, and Herbert, but her special favorite w Leni, her granddaughter, who, like Cornelia herself, put a high value on her appearance. A certai vanity revealed itself in Leni very early on, an almost pedantic approach to her person, and in th respect grandmother and granddaughter were very similar.

Cornelia, too, was always perfectly dressed; even when she lay sick in bed, she took good care put on makeup and show herself only in a fancy nightgown and lace-fringed bed jacket. Unlike th elegant beauty and sophistication of her granddaughter, though, Cornelia’s appearance had nothin provocative about it, nothing ostentatious. The difference from Leni was striking. Even as a chil Leni always headed straight at life with an open gaze and outstretched hands, while Cornelia alwa hung back, like someone who didn’t dare walk through a door even if it stood wide open. She ha always been fearful and sad, always anticipated terrible troubles. She didn’t have the gift of happines a talent that no one could deny in Leni.

Cornelia Stern née Cahn as an older woman (photo credit 1.7)

Ten chimes of the clock on the wall pull Alice out of her thoughts. High time for bed. She wipes th pen on the blotter and screws the inkwell shut. As she stands up and starts to get ready for bed, sh thinks over all the preparations for the upcoming party that still need to be taken care of. Franzi, coo and maid in one, has to wash the curtains in the living room, kitchen, and guest room tomorrow; th curtains in the bedroom don't need it for now. She should also put clean sheets on the bed and the so in the guest room, so everything will be ready when Otto arrives with Margot.

Anne, the little girl, wouldn't be coming this time, unfortunately—that's what Otto had written– Anne had come with him to Sils-Maria in the summer, after all, and Margot had not, so this time Ann would stay with Edith in Amsterdam. Too bad. Alice has a special affinity with the younger daughte maybe because she looks so similar to her father. And again she curses the Nazis, who have torn he family apart. Leni and Erich are here in Switzerland with their children, Stephan and Buddy; Robe has immigrated to London with his wife, Lotti; Herbert is in Paris; and Otto lives in Amsterdam wi his wife, Edith, and children, Margot and Anne. If it weren't for the Nazis, they would all b celebrating still in Frankfurt, in her large house with enough room for everybody.

Two days go by before Alice sits back down at her desk; on the intervening day, Leni and Eric arrived to discuss the details of the party and decide on the menu. They settled on clear vegetab

soup, then a trout au bleu, which Leni especially likes, then roast veal with potatoes and red cabbag and a plum compote with whipped cream for dessert. Erich will take care of getting some good win and apple juice for the children. Alice unscrews the inkwell and lays out the pen. Then she rereac straight through what she has already written before getting back to work.

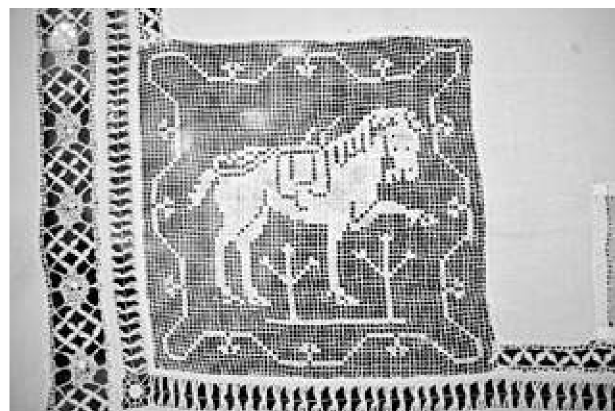
My mother felt great love & reverence, combined with great respect, for her old father, who was such a support for her. This rathe strict man, who had spent his childhood in the ghetto but was not in the least pious, spoiled me in his way & I think back on him w great devotion.

My uncle Julius, who also lived there, was kind enough to give me many cheerful hours, as you would later be able to learn f yourselves.[4] *From him I learned a taste for good music, and the evenings with a string quartet, which never met with m grandfather's approval, were a rare joy for me even though I was only allowed to listen from the next room. Very few tastes o inclinations in common united me with my other uncle's son and daughter, even though we associated with each other in the san house every day. Maybe they were jealous that I was our grandfather's favorite more than they were. As a result, my uncle criticize my behavior a lot. There was constant friction, which bothered my mother but which I was more or less indifferent to & which didn bother me very much.*

Alice has forgotten the causes of these arguments and tensions; they were probably in reality s trivial that there was no point in even trying to recall them. But she can still feel the atmo sphere the house, the complaining voice of her cousin and the reproachful, dejected reaction of her mothe who, although this became clear to her only much later, depended on the generosity of her father an her relatives. Alice's father had not left enough to guarantee a sufficient livelihood for his family.

My school years, up to my 15th year, were normal, no great expectations were made upon me, & since I had to leave school due the worsening illness of my mother, my education was definitely mediocre. I caught up somewhat with private lessons that I had wi my friends almost every day; I had many friends & we are still deeply devoted to each other, even today. What happy hours we spe in our "little circle"!—I could indulge my tendency to daydream all too easily while working on the many pieces of fine embroide that were the fashion back then. These daydreams took me far away, to places that were unattainable for me, & my summons back real life went less than smoothly frequently.

Alice puts down the pen and gently runs her fingers down the new lace collar she recently finishe and sewed onto her dark wool dress. Even today needlework is her passion and she can spend hou working on it, thinking up endless new and more complicated patterns: animals, leaves, vines. All c the table linens in her apartment were made by hand—embroidered, crocheted, embellished wi homemade lace, hemstitched, with pictures and monograms in delicate white embroidery. Tableclot and place mats, napkins, doilies, handkerchiefs, underwear, collars on coats and blouses: she mad them all herself. Even some of the lace curtains.



Needlework by Alice Frank (photo credit 1.8)

She can sit at the window for hours at a time, moving her fingers in an even rhythm. She is happ when animals appear under her fingers—deer, sheep, swans, and fabulous beasts; flowers, branche leaves, grapes, always another new ornament—and every time another piece is finished, she feels great sense of satisfaction and pride that comes from within, irrespective of the judgment of others. is a deep need she has, to produce something that is not only useful but beautiful too, almost as if sh were bringing beauty into the world with the work of her hands, and thereby making the world a litt bit better. She sometimes thinks that the needle for her is what the pen must be to a poet, and th thread is her ink; sometimes she compares her work to a painter's. If she had not come into the wor as a woman, she might perhaps have become a great painter. Sitting with her needlework an dreaming away while something beautiful takes shape under her fingers is her greatest pleasure. B whereas her dreams used to carry her off into unreachable distances, today they tend to carry her in what is—for now at least—a no-longer-reachable past.

If, in later years, I was able to see the foreign lands I had always longed for with my own eyes, I have only the goodness of yo father to thank for this happiness.

I attracted his attention when I was only 15, but of course I was much too young & thoroughly inexperienced to think much abo it. Still, I happily accepted every proof of his interest in me.—In any case, my thoughts & feelings were going in entirely oth directions at that time, which your father well knew but which didn't hinder him from showing me how pleased he was with me.— These events, unforgettable for me, that I mentioned above, I would rather leave unmentioned here, since they affect only me & or call up painful memories in me that should in no way concern and burden you.—

Alice could not remember the exact occasion when she met Michael, but he knew it precisely: was at a party at the Gymnasium Francofurtanum. He had liked her right away, he told her later, h had even danced with her, a galop, but she hadn't especially noticed him. He chalked up her lack interest to her youth—she was fifteen, and he was fourteen years older, almost twice her age. She wa in love with a boy at the time, for the first time—an unhappy love that caused her much heartach Later, though, when she kept seeing Michael at parties and receptions at friends' and acquaintances and became more and more interested in him, and her interest turned to love, and she finally gave and accepted his proposal, she was grateful that fate had kept her for him. She could not have found better husband than Michael Frank. It was his love and generosity that opened up the world for her.

I did not lack for admirers, and heaps of flowers and poems flew into the house that was run so puritanically—this caus displeasure in my family, especially since these suitors did not always come from so-called "good society" & therefore had undergo severe criticism. I didn't care as much about that. I was happy to accept every sign of youthful enthusiasm & th "serenades" connected to it. And how perfect the ground-floor windows were for these serenades, in that house on Hochstrasse th was otherwise so dreary!—I took my first great trip when I was 16, to see my cousin in Bern who was married by then. The gre occasion was duly planned, and well-meaning warnings and recommendations were not lacking. The journey that brought us first Mannheim, where I was invited to a magnificent concert of the then very famous Florentine Quartet in a private residence, was th overture for many lovely & enjoyable hours. I spent almost 3 months with my relatives, in complete harmony, & I met a number very interesting people there. The old-fashioned city also made a powerful impression on me & so I returned home with many stori to tell. Of course I had also realized that much was lacking in my education, which I then attempted to improve with diligent readin & study, and to some extent I succeeded.

Alice stands up, stretches, and shakes out her cramped writing hand. Klärchen, her favorite cousi

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