

MY ANCESTRAL ROOTS

– Tony Keller, 2024

My sister, Elizabeth Keller Kagan (1942–2017), my brother, Robert Keller (1937–) and I, Anthony Keller (1939–), were born into an interesting family.

Our maternal great-great-grandfather, Aaron Cahn (1818–1903), a peddler, and his wife Caroline (1831–1909), emigrated from Germany to New York, and went west around 1852. Settling in Omaha soon after the city was founded in 1856, and raising their family there, they were among the first Jews in Nebraska. They participated in the community's first High Holy Days services in 1867 and helped establish Temple Israel, Omaha's first synagogue, which opened in 1884. They had three children: Martin (b. 1857), Albert Aaron (b. 1861) our maternal great-grandfather, and Carrie (b. 1865).

Albert Aaron married Caroline Cahn (1831–1909), our maternal great-grandmother, and they had three children: Viola (1886–1933), our maternal grandmother, Hazel (1888–1958) and Albert Aaron Cahn Jr. (1894–1969). Albert Jr. ran a successful haberdashery store in Omaha and, among his other accomplishments he was a competitive golfer and a billiards master (he took on the world champion, Willie Hoppe, in a demonstration match in Hartford, CT in the early 1900's, and according to unreliable family legend, won handily.) Albert Jr. married Elise Ellbogen of Chicago, and they had one son, Jim (1925–1994). The two Cahn girls left Omaha at an early age: Hazel to the west coast and Viola to the east coast. Hazel (Hartman) became a prominent decorator in Los Angeles, designed the interiors and furnished the homes of many Hollywood stars, and lived a long and colorful life. Viola became the wife of Isidore Witmark at 22, and brought two daughters, Carolyn (1910–1968), our mother, and our aunt, Marion (1913–2005), into the world.

Our maternal great-grandfather, Marcus Witmark (original family name “Witkowski”), Isidore's father, was born in a small Prussian town in 1834. He came to America in 1853 in the wave of German immigration that followed the Revolution of 1848. As a young man, he followed his brothers, Simon and David, from New York to the South where he became, like our maternal great-great grandfather Aaron, a peddler, and then a dry goods store owner in Fort Gaines, Georgia. When the Civil War broke out Marcus joined the Confederacy, and soon Lieutenant Witmark had his own company which he equipped and trained. He was put in charge of the city of Macon, and then, as *Captain* Witmark, commanded a battery at Richmond. Wounded at Gettysburg and captured, he was hospitalized then taken to Johnson's Island, the Union prisoner-of-war camp for Confederate officers, in Sandusky, Ohio, from which he was released at the end of the war. In 1866, soon after returning to New York, where he established a children's lace cap business, Marcus married Henrietta Peyser (1840–1906), his

childhood sweetheart whom he had not seen for 13 years and who had recently arrived from the old country. The Witmarks had seven children, six sons (Isidore, our maternal grandfather, Jay, Julius, Frank, Eddie and Adolph) and a daughter (Frances, a.k.a. “Frankie”).

Isidore Witmark (1870–1941), with two of his brothers, Jay and Julie, established M. Witmark & Sons, which, between 1889 and 1930, was a leader in the sheet music publishing business. Because they were all under legal age when they went into business, they incorporated under their father's name, Marcus – “M. Witmark and Sons”. The Witmark Publishing Company (“the Tiffany of the Music World”) printed and distributed sheet music for songs, operettas and revues by Victor Herbert, W.C. Handy, George M. Cohan, Ben Harney, Sigmund Romberg and dozens of other Tin Pan Alley composers. Their music came out of the Witmark shop and into homes all over the world in the days when standing around the upright rather than sitting in front of the television set was the focus of home entertainment. The remarkable story of the Witmarks is told by Isidore in his 1939 book, *From Ragtime to Swingtime*.

On a visit to New York in 1904 when she was 18, Viola Cahn met Isidore Witmark, and, after a four-year long-distance courtship, Viola and Isidore were married in Omaha to the strains of a wedding march composed for them by Victor Herbert. They led a fast-paced life in New York, dominated by Isidore's responsibilities and connections in the music world, and had two daughters, Carolyn, our mother (1910–1968), and our Aunt Marion (1912–2005). Carolyn Henrietta Witmark was born at home, an apartment on New York's Riverside Drive. Early on, Isidore and Viola moved the family to Woodmere, Long Island – for Isidore a daily trip on the Long Island commuter train to his New York City office in the six-story Witmark Building the brothers built on West 37th Street in 1903. At Woodmere Academy Carolyn was an honors student, the class valedictorian, editor of the school newspaper and a pitcher on the boys' baseball team. She went on to Wellesley College but rheumatoid arthritis kept her from completing her senior year, and she never got her degree. One compensation for the illness that had confined her to her bed for a year was the consistent attention of a young friend of the family, Alexander Keller, who visited her frequently. In 1932 she became Carolyn Witmark *Keller*. Two years later her mother, Viola, died at the age of 48. Carolyn and Marion loved their mom deeply, regarded her as their best friend, and grieved her loss profoundly.

Our paternal grandfather, Sidney Keller (1872–1930), came to New York from Stuttgart, Germany, as a young man. A gifted, thoughtful and ambitious fellow, Sidney became a machine tool designer and entrepreneur who, with his cousin Joe, established the Keller Mechanical Engineers in Brooklyn, a firm that helped to modernize America's machine tool industry. In the early 1900s, Sidney and Joe invented,

manufactured and marketed engraving dies for the production of silverware. Expanding their scope, the Keller cousins produced duplicating and reducing machines of many kinds – tracers, die cutters, grinders, shapers, lathes and controls. The process called “kellering” was of major importance in the machine tool industry through the end of the twentieth century.

Our paternal grandmother, Elsie Davidson Keller (1883–1976) married Sidney Keller in _____. She was the only grandparent Bob, Betsy and I (and our double cousins Peter, Jane and Jim) knew, Isidore having died when we were very young, and Sidney and Viola before we were born. Elsie (“Nell”) was a sweet, strong, bright, endearing woman, who, after the loss of her husband in 1930 when he was 58, became a matriarch in her extended family of Davidsons, Kellers, Grossmans, Gruns and Untermeyers. That family was an interesting cluster of achieving individuals: lawyers, doctors, entrepreneurs, a poet, a Christian Science reader and a noted rabbi, Rudolph Grossman (1867–1927) of Temple Rodeph Sholom in New York. Having grown up with four brothers herself and having received a teaching degree from Hunter College, Elsie was well prepared to raise four spirited sons – Alexander, Richard, Paul and Charles – and to be a ready audience for their hijinks. (They would go to see live performances by the Marx Brothers and re-enact the comedy routines at great length and with great hilarity, at home.) She saw to it that they were well-educated (Cornell, Brooklyn Polytech, Harvard) and readied for strong careers and colorful lives: Dick as an engineer for the Pratt & Whitney machine tool company in West Hartford, Connecticut, and a fighter for the rights and opportunities of the handicapped; Paul as the owner of a cottonseed oil milling company in Clayton, North Carolina and the creator of an anti-poverty agency for Johnston County, NC; Charles as a leading social realist painter in the 1930s, 40s 50s and 60s and as the cartoonist for the communist newspaper *The Daily Worker* and later art director for *The Daily World*.

Our dad, Alexander Keller (1905–1958), the oldest of the four brothers, graduated *cum laude* from Harvard in 1926, an English major whose senior thesis was on language in the plays of Ben Jonson. Graduating from Harvard Business School in 1928, Al walked right into the Depression. He took over the Keller Mechanical Engineering Company in 1930 when his father died, and stabilized his family's financial future by selling the rights to the KME's Keller machines to the Pratt & Whitney Machine Tool Company. In 1931 Al was hired by Pratt & Whitney as vice-president, general sales manager and head of the new Keller Division. He moved to West Hartford, and was joined by his new bride Carolyn in 1932 and his brother Richard who took on major engineering responsibilities at the plant. Under the brothers' guidance the scope of the machines' capacity was once again expanded and Al traveled extensively around the world to market the new products. There was no machine tool big enough to make the dies to produce solid steel automobile tops until [very large Keller machines](#) were

produced in the 1940s, and by the beginning of World War II, Pratt & Whitney was also turning out [airplane propellers](#). In 1937, Alexander and Carolyn became parents with the birth of Robert, followed in 1939 with Anthony and with Elizabeth in 1942. Al and Cal were well known in the Hartford community during the 1930s and 40s for sponsoring and obtaining U.S. citizenship for European refugees fleeing the Holocaust, sponsoring dozens of people who, without their intercession, would not have survived the war. Al signed affidavits accepting responsibility for each one and it was a point of great pride for him that none of the affidavits ever needed to be activated. In 1949-51 Alex was selected by the State Department to lead Holland's post-war industrial recovery through the Marshall Plan, and the Keller family lived in the Netherlands during that time. He was knighted by Queen Juliana for his impact on the Dutch economy. Back at home in the 1950s, one of Alexander and Carolyn's most enduring achievements was their successful lobbying for the establishment of the University of Connecticut Health Center, a medical school, dental school, hospital and research facility. Before the Health Center was created, the state's only medical school was at Yale and it accepted disproportionately small numbers of Jews, African-Americans and women. For the Kellers, the solution to the discriminatory policies of the time was to create a public school that would not impose quotas on admissions. Today at the University of Connecticut medical school, women outnumber men and the enrollment of minorities receiving training for careers in medicine is very large. Al was the chapter chairman of the American Jewish Committee in Connecticut and Cal took his place in that work after his death at 52 in 1958. When he died, she began lovingly curating the Alexander Keller Memorial Lecture series in her husband's memory at the University of Hartford, a program that, between 1958 and 1976, presented over 65 world leaders – statesmen, scholars, performers, diplomats, scientists and writers – as lecturers and participants in convocations, performances and seminars. (Among the speakers were Martin Luther King Jr., John Kenneth Galbraith, Abba Eban, Gunnar Myrdal, Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Sonia Sanchez, Sir Herbert Read, Harlow Shapley, Sir Isaiah Berlin, Robert Penn Warren, Sir Kenneth Clark, Mark Van Doren, Archibald MacLeish, Barbara Ward, Jackie McLean and Germaine Bree.)

[Next: Description of the lives and contributions of the following three generations: (1) Bob, Tony, Peter, Betsy, Jane, Jim, Susan; (2) Alexandra, Hillary, Elsie, Rachel, Michael, Alexander, Stefan, Carolyn, Susannah, Sandra, Viola; (3) Max, Ava, Jasper, Noah, Alexan, Celia, Rebecca, Jacob, Nathan, Sylvie, Willa.]