

Margot Pampel

Title: *As Chance Would Have It: From Jena to Melbourne.*

Author: Margot Pampel with Felicity Zwalf

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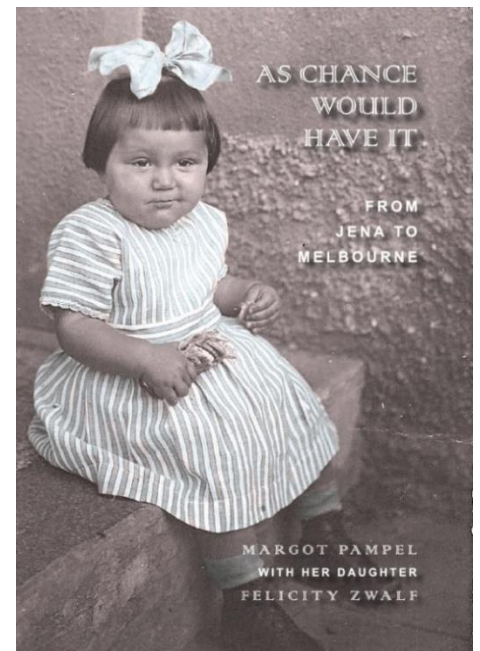
Location of Book: Monash University, Lamm Jewish Library, Sydney Jewish Museum, and other public libraries.

Cities/towns/camps: Germany: Jena, Triebis, Erfurt, Aken, Berlin, Weimar, Frankfurt, Bonn; Italy: Bolzano, Corvara; Australia: Melbourne.

Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: *Kristallnacht*; *Mischling*; in-hiding; false identity.



As Chance Would Have It is the 171-page memoir of German-Jewish survivor Margot Pampel. Born to a Jewish mother and gentile father, Margot lived out the war years in Nazi Germany under her own name by concealing her Jewish heritage and presenting herself as a “full-blooded Aryan”.

The frontmatter contains explanatory notes by the author’s daughter, Felicity Zwalf. Pages 1-23 recount Margot’s family background and childhood in Jena. Pages 24-36 detail her father’s death in 1930 and the rise of Nazism. Pages 37-68 discuss the intensification of antisemitic persecution following the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, culminating in her mother’s arrest and murder in Auschwitz in 1943. Pages 69-80 trace the final war years and Margot’s life as fugitive in various cities across Germany and Northern Italy after being urged to flee Jena. Pages 81-99 describe liberation and life in communist East Germany. Pages 100-117 trace her escape to West Germany in 1949 and life there. Pages 118-145 follow her emigration to Australia in 1954 and life in Melbourne. Pages 146–171 conclude with reflections and tributes by Felicity.

Margot Pampel was born on 24 May 1922 in Jena, Germany, the only child of Gitta Czerwinska, a Polish Jew, and August Reinhardt, a German atheist and socialist. Despite her mother’s Orthodox Jewish background, the family had little connection to Judaism after becoming partly estranged from their Jewish family. As a child, Margot attended the progressive and egalitarian “Jena Plan School” where she excelled.

In 1930, Margot’s father died unexpectedly, leaving the family in financial hardship. Following Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, the family encountered little harassment until the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935 when Gitta’s pension was reduced.

That same year, Margot's Headmaster at the Jena Plan School, Professor Petersen, persuaded Gitta to sign a document falsely declaring her daughter's full-Aryan ancestry in order to secure a scholarship to a prestigious girls' school – marking the beginning of a sustained effort to conceal Margot's part-Jewish background. In a further attempt to assimilate, Margot joined the Jungmädel, the Nazi youth organisation. Although awarded the scholarship, she was expelled two years later, and her stipend revoked, after the Principal uncovered her Jewish origins.

With only her mother's meagre pension to support them, sixteen-year-old Margot was forced to take insecure domestic work as a kitchen-hand and maid. As antisemitic laws tightened, the Reinhardt women became increasingly ostracised and were repeatedly evicted by their landlords upon discovery of their Jewish heritage. Margot suffered profound loneliness, maintaining enduring friendships only with a schoolmate, Ruth, and their former neighbours, the Grosskurths.

In November 1938, during *Kristallnacht*, uniformed Nazis arrested Gitta, although she was released the following day. In 1939, desperate for work, Margot joined the *Arbeitsdienst* (the Nazi labour service) by falsely declaring herself full-Aryan and spent six months at a youth camp in Triebs, performing agricultural labour. Returning to Jena in October 1940, she maintained her Aryan persona and secured work as a typist in a wire factory.

Meanwhile, Gitta faced increasing police harassment and, after further reductions to her pension, was forced to work as a cleaner. In December 1942, following a workplace injury, her employers reported her for refusing to work. She was subsequently arrested and deported to Auschwitz.

Margot endured her mother's arrest in silence until May 1943, when authorities phoned her at work informing her of Gitta's death. Grief-stricken, she confided in her colleagues and was promptly dismissed for being Jewish.

With help from her loyal friend Ruth, Margot secured work as an assistant to Herr Rösner, a copying machine manufacturer. Initially welcomed by colleagues and forming a close bond with Rösner's daughter Helga, relations turned hostile after her Jewish identity was uncovered. Although she retained her position due to wartime labour shortages, Margot endured daily vilification that eventually led to a mental breakdown and six weeks psychiatric hospitalisation.

Due to her sudden hospitalisation, Margot had not returned work equipment in her possession and was visited by Helga Rösner to retrieve it. Although the equipment was recovered, the Rösners reported Margot for theft and sabotage. Shortly after her discharge, Margot was arrested and held in custody for several days pending a court hearing.

Fortunately, the magistrate responded with unexpected compassion: Margot was fined the minimum penalty and urged to flee Jena immediately. After the war, she learned

this warning saved her life as her name, along with other remaining *Mischlinge* in Jena, had been listed for deportation to the camps.

Margot turned to the Grosskurth family, who arranged work for her at a convent orphanage in Erfurt. After six months in near-total seclusion, she left in mid-1944 to seek refuge with relatives in Aken and Berlin but was unable to secure long-term shelter. Applying instead for a secretarial position with the *Organisation Todt*, she was posted to Jessen and was later transferred to the Italian Alps. Although her situation stabilised, in the final weeks of the war, Margot was again dismissed after her Jewish identity was discovered. She returned to Jena amid Allied air raids, hiding in a bomb shelter until liberation by American forces in April 1945.

After Jena was transferred to Soviet control, Margot resumed her studies and enrolled at a Russian school in Weimar to train as a language teacher. In 1947, she escaped to Frankfurt in the American zone, where she was assisted and employed by the JOINT. She later joined the British Control Commission in Bonn, where she met her future husband, Horst Pampel. They married and their son Michael was born in 1953. In 1954, the family emigrated to Melbourne where their daughter Felicity was born.

After suffering a minor stroke in 2000, aged eighty-six, Margot began recounting her story at Felicity's urging – having concealed her past for decades, even from her husband. Over several months, mother and daughter recorded Margot's testimony in German, which Felicity transcribed and translated into English.

As Chance Would Have It is a deeply personal account of the author's daily life as a *Mischling* under Nazi rule that vividly captures the psychological toll of isolation and enduring conflict between her Jewish and German identities. The narrative also reflects on the varied responses of ordinary Germans under Nazism and is enriched by Margot's later reflections, as well as editorial contributions by her daughter. It also touches on pre-war German politics and the unique Jena Plan education system. The memoir was written and published through the Makor Jewish Community Library's "Write Your Story" program.