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## Mandelbroyt and Memory

**To Gail Lesser-Gerber and her father, Ben, mandelbroyt bread is much more than a dunkable cookie. It's family. It's tradition. It's remembrance.**

By Lauren Reisig  
 June 2012, updated May 2014

"Too many people nowadays do not know their family roots. They know where they're from, but they don't know the stories, and it's these stories that we need to keep alive. And through this idea, [Papa Ben's Kitchen](#) was born," says Gail Lesser-Gerber, PBK President and daughter of the company's namesake, Ben Lesser.

Mandelbroyt, literally translated, is simply almond (*mandel*) bread (*broyt*). But to the Lesser family, their mandelbroyt holds a much deeper meaning. It's family. It's tradition. It's remembrance.

Lesser, born in Krakow, Poland in 1928, was one of five children. At the end of the Holocaust, he was one of two, losing both his parents and most of his immediate and extended family to Nazi atrocities. This loss did not define his life, nor did it define the lives of his children, however. While growing up, Lesser-Gerber recalls in a phone interview with *Jewish Woman*, whereas her friends whose parents were also Holocaust survivors had, "darkness in their house[s], my parents...had a very bright and open household. I think that's probably because my father did not want to live in the past. He came to the United States to build a future, and all he could see was building from the ground up. He felt that he could accomplish anything he wanted."



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A recent cover of Specialty Food Magazine featured President Gail Lesser-Gerber and Papa Ben Lesser.

And so he did. In addition to building a loving family, Lesser achieved great professional success, creating a thriving Los Angeles-based real estate business. His strong work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit are ideals Lesser's father instilled in him at a very young age. These same values drove his family's attempts to evade Nazi capture. "When they were on the run and had to leave [Krakow], a brother-in-law to-be gave my grandfather some flour, and salt and a couple other things," Lesser-Gerber says. "So instead of just making bread for the family, he decided to bake pretzels and cookies and sell them to bars at night. That's how he made money for his family."

Baking is still the most tangible connection Lesser has to the family he lost, and something that can be reestablished with the simple toss of the flour. "My dad had this way of tossing his flour, and it always amazed me. To watch him throw the flour and turn the dough is just an incredible thing to [witness]," Lesser-Gerber says. Her voice trails off, though her smile is apparent even over the phone.

And so, over the years, rather than talking about the past as a way to remember, Lesser would simply enter the kitchen and bake. In fact, until a request by his grandson to speak to the boy's 4th grade class, he never, "spoke publicly or beyond our family dining room table about [the Holocaust,]" she notes. "[But going] to a classroom with young kids [made him realize] that the stories need to be told."

So, in his retirement, Lesser is dedicating his life to speaking and educating others about the Holocaust, a decision which inspired the [Zachor Foundation](#), established in January 2009. When the family was brainstorming ways to help fund the foundation, mass-producing the family's beloved mandelbroyt seemed only natural. The key, Lesser-Gerber explains, is maintaining the integrity of the homemade product, from the hand-rolled dough to the use of the finest ingredients, including Belgian chocolate and natural maraschino cherries.



Three generations of women work together at Papa Ben's Kitchen to make the world a better place one cookie at a time: Owner Jean Lesser, center, with her daughter Gail Lesser-Gerber, company president, left, and granddaughter Jenica Gerber, director of sales and marketing

Lesser-Gerber worked with her father to develop new flavors, creating a modern take on the Eastern European classic. At present, PBK is exclusively producing five flavors of mandelbroyt: minty dark chocolate, chocolate espresso bean, lemon blueberry with poppy seeds, spicy chipotle with ginger and dark chocolate, and, of course, the original family recipe, still Lesser's favorite.

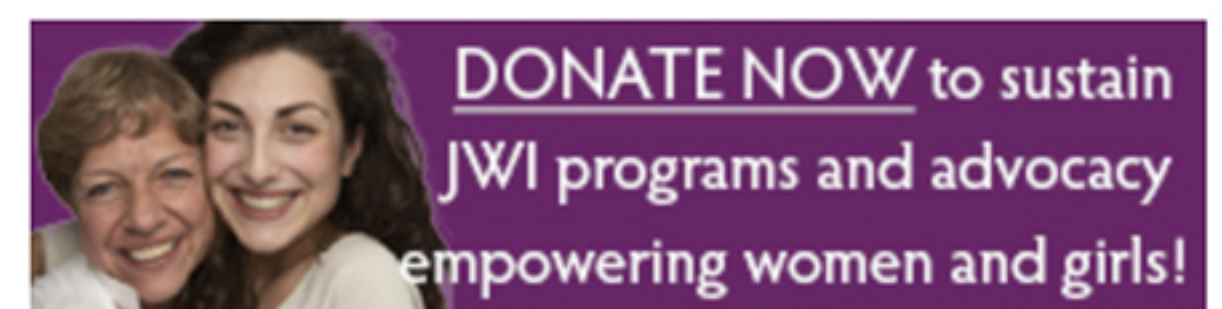
PBK mandelbroyt is available online through the [company website](#), where you can also search to see if it is in stock at a store near you. A portion of the proceeds from the sale of each package of PBK mandelbroyt goes to the Zachor Foundation. Papa Ben's has created a special 20 percent discount for *Jewish Woman* readers. Use the code **JewishWomen** at checkout on the Papa Ben's website.

Like the foundation, PBK is about remembering the past. "I want people to sit down with our mandelbroyt and tell their stories. That's what my dad wants, that's what I want." Lesser-Gerber says.

To her, PBK is more than a new business venture. It is also a means to honor her father, a man who "knows how precious life is, who has first-hand experience about what it's like to fight for your life, and doesn't take a single breath or a day for granted."

*Celebrity Chef Randy Fuhrman has created a recipe for [Papa Ben's Spicy Pumpkin Cheesecake Recipe](#) using Papa Ben's Kitchen's Spicy Chipotle with Ginger and Dark Chocolate Mandelbroyt.*

Lauren Reisig is an intern at *Jewish Woman* magazine.



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