

# GENE & FRED

## *Country Roads by Paula Brunner Abelow*

Paula Brunner was born in Prague, former Czechoslovakia, in 1923. Her father, Felix Brunner, was an avid stamp collector and reputable stamp dealer. In September 1938, while participating in an international stamp exhibit in Zürich, Felix was informed by a client – the son-in-law of Benito Mussolini – not to return to Prague, and to remove his family from the city (and the country) as soon as possible. Felix took this advice to heart and, without hesitation, chartered a plane for his family to escape. The Nazis invaded Prague and occupied all of Czechoslovakia on March 15, 1939.

Paula and her siblings attended boarding school in Switzerland while their parents headed to the United States on a travel visa. In 1940, the children met their parents in the States but were not granted approval to stay. As a result, the family relocated to Mexico City where they spent a full year waiting for approval to live permanently and collectively north of the border. They all eventually settled in New York City where Paula took night classes at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art from 1944 to 1948. In her final year of studies, Paula married Ira Abelow, and in 1949, they gave birth to their first son, Ralph. Soon after, the three of them moved to Frederick, Maryland, where Ira ultimately worked as a chemical engineer at Fort Detrick.

In their later years, Paula and Ira moved to a farm in Charles Town, West Virginia where they raised pheasants. Until learning more about Paula's history, I didn't realize that pheasants were native to Eurasia, which made me think more about her diaspora (and diaspora at large). Isn't it wild that a couple of cosmopolitan Jews ended up on a 300-acre farm with a bunch of big birds? Sounds like the beginnings of a Borscht Belt bit, no? The rural, rustic surroundings of Frederick, Maryland and later Charles Town, West Virginia no doubt informed Paula's art practice for decades.

In near (artistic) isolation, Paula developed bodies upon bodies of brilliant work. It is certainly rather unlikely that she was very aware of trends or developments in the contemporary art world, but she was certainly quite aware of European 20<sup>th</sup> Century masters such as Henri Matisse, whom she loved deeply. Paula both influenced and inspired her grandchildren to embrace art – this included Joshua, who spent a month in Europe with both Paula and Ira when he was sixteen. I know, from speaking with him, that this experience was foundational to him wanting to become an artist himself. Ira died in 1998, the same year that Joshua graduated from RISD, which was also the year before he moved to New York City to pursue a life and career in art.

Joshua has since become a major advocate for Paula's work and has been successful in finding and creating opportunities to gain exposure for it. In the past decade plus, Paula's work has been featured in notable exhibitions such as the 2013 Prague Biennale; a 2014 solo exhibition at Lucie Fontaine in Milan, Italy; a 2016 mini-retrospective at Freddy in Harris, New York; a 2016 group exhibition at Jack Hanley Gallery in New York, New York; a 2019 group exhibition with her grandchildren at Nina Johnson in Miami, Florida; a 2021 two-person exhibition at Et al. in San Francisco, California; and a group exhibition at Swanson Kuball in Long Island City, New York in 2024.

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I should share that I personally grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which is about a three-hour drive from both Charles Town, West Virginia and Frederick, Maryland. I've probably driven many of the country roads that Paula is referencing in these drawings, although I don't think it matters too much which specific roads on which these drawings are based. The drawings hit a lot of notes – they seem to embody many of the feelings one might have on any country road in this expansive, confusing, hopeful, and problematic nation – sadness, happiness, loneliness, hopefulness, peacefulness, fearlessness, etc.

Perhaps, the drawings metaphorically refer to the many roads and miles she traveled during her notable lifetime. Paula passed away on August 31, 2018, at the age of 94, just four years after she made this collection of drawings. When Joshua and I decided to embark on this collaborative gallery together, we both agreed that a solo show of Paula's "Country Roads" was the most fitting choice for an inaugural exhibition. We really could not be any more proud or more pleased to share this late body of works on paper with you. We'd also like to thank Tisch Abelow and Andy Abelow for their love and support of Paula's artistic legacy. Gene & Fred is an effort of both friends and family, and this particular exhibition embodies the essence and mission of what we're trying to do, both locally and beyond, in an especially meaningful way.

- Keith J. Varadi, January 2026