

# *Searching for Family Again*

**A**FTER AGREEING TO RENDEZVOUS with Rick in Prague in mid-August, I booked a flight that would allow me some time to travel on my own. Primarily, I wanted to go back to Linz where the Fränkels had lived to see if there was more information in the archives. I also wanted to spend time with my friends Tracey and Martin, and if possible, take them up on their offer to drive with me to Strobnitz, my hometown in the Czech Republic.

In the 1960s, I had tried to enter Czechoslovakia when it was still under communist control. Although the border guards had showed no interest in my American travel companions, one look at my place of birth resulted in my passport being confiscated for over an hour. As we sat in the hot car under a blazing summer sun, the guards grilled me, asking again and again for names of “contacts,” and mocking my claim not to speak Czech. When at last I was allowed to enter, it was only on condition that I accept a “tour guide” who accompanied my every step. She sat sullenly at our table while we drank watery coffee and she leaned impatiently against the cubicle when I visited the washroom. She directed us to a souvenir kiosk and watched as we spent the requisite number of dollars on a few cheaply made

trinkets. When we returned to the border crossing, there were more delays. The guards removed the back seat and placed the car on a hoist to ensure that I was not smuggling Czech citizens out of the country.

This time, entering the Czech Republic was much simpler. After a leisurely breakfast in their kitchen, I followed Tracey and Martin to their car and we drove along the river and out of the city. Despite a steady drizzle, the cheerful countryside buoyed our spirits. Tidy houses with flowers cascading from painted window boxes alternated with orchards pregnant with ripening fruit and with prosperous farmland where cows grazed in rich green meadows.

The border crossing stood in sharp contrast to the bucolic Austrian scenery. Grey cement-block buildings peppered with grey-faced guards in drab, one-size-fits-all uniforms. An indifferent guard stamped my passport. The guard yawned as he lifted the flimsy wooden barrier. We drove through to a barren road lined with prostitutes in cheap glamour outfits. Some were in stiletto heels, others in thigh-high boots. All wore ultra-short skirts and tight tops despite the driving rain. Most were young. Behind them lay nothing but deserted fields and overgrown woods.

Martin sensed our discomfort. For him, the scene was not new. “*It’s dreadful,*” he said. “*Human misery as an announcement of economic adversity. There are rows of prostitutes at all the border crossings into the Czech Republic. It’s the only thing they have to sell.*”

Faces blurred as our car rushed forward. Only the relentless click-clack of the wipers broke the dismal silence. Muffled, the countryside flowed past the windows. Grey clouds hung shroud-like over endless fields of corn broken by occasional clusters of dilapidated houses whose sagging roofs pressed upon walls long since leached of colour. No flower boxes adorned these windows, and no gardens bloomed in plots where rusting equipment sank into narrow strips of weed. Hopelessness was written everywhere, and it seeped even into the sealed car.

At last, we spotted the sign: *Horní Stropnice*. Only in my memory did its former name *Strobnitz* survive. I looked at my watch. It was only 1:30 in the afternoon, although the lowering sky made it seem later. The village was dreary beyond belief. A cheerless hamlet of unrelieved grey. Ashen cement



My hometown village, Strobnitz, is shuttered and unwelcoming

blocks beneath an ashen sky. Not a single pedestrian was scurrying for cover. The inhabitants had hunkered down in their gloomy caves. Not one welcoming light shone.

Our house was easy to find. Number 36 is one slice of a long, single two-story block of grey cement that reaches from one street to the next. A row of colourless signs announces a variety of stores and businesses on the ground floor. Upstairs on this sunless afternoon, faded chintz curtains closed off every window. Here and there, an empty window box yawned into the unbroken greyness.

Only one house was different. Number 36. Its storefront had been crudely bricked over in ugly yellowish-brown blocks. I saw it as a clumsy effort to erase the last trace of the Jews who had once lived here. The Jews who were my family.

Tini and her family came here a few years ago. They had told me that the house was right opposite the cenotaph in the centre of the village. I looked at the inscription on the stone slab erected in the midst of a flowerless strip of unmowed grass. *To the brave inhabitants of Horní Stropnice who fell in defence of the homeland.*

I paused to untangle the words and their meaning. This area had been predominantly German speaking, and its inhabitants had welcomed the Nazis who promised to reunite them with their German brothers. This meant that those who had “fallen in defence of the homeland” had therefore been killed by Allied hands.

And what about my family? My parents and grandparents had been victims of these very inhabitants whom the inscription sought to memorialize. Tini said that before our wagon reached the edge of town, neighbours had come to ransack the house. Was a favourite plate belonging to my grandmother Fanny now gracing a mantle behind one of those unmoving curtains?

Turning away, I told Tracey and Martin to stay in the car while I took just a few pictures before leaving. I stared at the house. My heart felt as numb as my cold, wet fingers fumbling with the camera. I decided to take one last photo of the entire block from the street corner. From this vantage point, my eye caught sight of a lovely white church, its dome glistening in the rain. Delighted to find beauty in this dismal place, I asked Martin to turn the car around and to follow me.

I walked over to the church, where small groups of people were huddled under black umbrellas. Because it was Saturday afternoon, I assumed that the people were a wedding party. Moving closer, I was certain that I heard German being spoken.

This surprised me as Tini had repeatedly said that my visit would be a waste of time because people in the Czech Republic no longer speak German. Tini knew this not only from her recent visit, but because she and her

family had been among the German-speakers whom the Czechs had unceremoniously booted out after the war.

I approached the nearest group and addressed my questions to a well-dressed man in a suit.

*“You speak German?”*

*“Of course.”*

*“Are you from here?”*

*“Of course.”*

*“Oh, that’s great because I don’t speak Czech. I am looking for someone who may remember my family. They had a store here. My father was Edmund Waldstein, and his father was Josef Waldstein.”*

Silence. Lingering, uncomfortable silence. Wordlessly, the people in the little group eyed one another. Faces blanched. Slowly, the people melted away, as if fleeing into the church. I was left with my hand on the sleeve of the well-dressed man. He watched the backs of his companions. He looked for a long while at his own shoes. Finally he spoke.

*“Of course I knew them. Everyone here knew them. We knew them well. But now there is no time to talk. I must go into the church. Come into the church with me and we will talk later.”*

I waved Tracey and Martin forward, urging them to join me. Together, we entered through the arched doorway.

The interior of the church was warm and welcoming. Stained glass windows cast flashes of ruby red onto the whitewashed walls. An ornate rococo altar, heavy with gold drew the eye to the cross. To the right, a life-sized Madonna garbed in deep blue stretched both arms toward the congregation. To the left, an intricately carved staircase wound its way to the pulpit. Everywhere, candles flickered, casting their golden glow upon burnished wooden pews.

Already a voice was intoning from the pulpit. I tried to follow, but the thick regional dialect allowed me to catch only isolated words. *Forgiveness. Reconciliation.* I thought these odd words for a wedding, but looked about expectantly for a bride and groom. A hymn and then more disconnected words followed. *Peace. Remembrance. Moderation. Restraint.* I nudged Martin. *“Do you understand?”* He nodded. Relieved that I need not struggle to

decipher the words, I allowed the space and the music to flow around me until the congregation rose to file out.

Politely I shook the hand of the priest planted in the doorway, my eyes already searching for the man in the suit. He was surrounded by people including Martin. Tracey and I waited impatiently. Finally, Martin returned to answer our questions.

Today was August 8, the second Saturday in August. Since the end of World War II, this group had assembled every year at 2 p.m. on the second Saturday of August. They gathered to remember Strobnitz, the town where they had been born and had gone to school, had married, and established new families. The town that the Czechs had forced them to leave after the war. The Czechs had made no distinction between Nazi collaborators and Sudeten-Germans. The Czechs simply drove everyone who spoke German into exile.

Tini had been forced out too. She had been given three hours to pack her bags and leave. What the Czechs did to the Sudeten-Germans was akin to what the latter had done to my family.

For many years, the Sudeten-Germans were not allowed to enter Czechoslovakia. The Communist government refused to let them in. The closest to Strobnitz that these former townsfolk could come was to a hillside in Austria. From there, on a clear day, they could see Strobnitz. Every year, they came, from Austria, from Germany, from Belgium and Holland, and from wherever they had found refuge. At two o'clock, on the second Saturday in August, they gathered on that hillside in Austria. There, they held an outdoor church service and gazed across at their hometown.

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Sudeten-Germans have been allowed to return. Now, they meet in the church in Strobnitz every year at 2 p.m. on the second Saturday in August.

*"How did you find us?"* a voice asked. *"Who told you we'd be here today?"*

I shook my head in wonderment. This was beyond coincidence. What unseen hand had guided my footsteps? What chance had brought me across the ocean on the second Saturday in August? What had led me to this church at ten minutes to two? Ten minutes later, these people would have already been inside the church and I would not have known of their existence.

Not only had I come from afar, I had arrived after an interval of more than sixty years, and had uttered the name Waldstein, a name unspoken here in all that time.

Small wonder that faces had blanched. Even to myself, I seemed to be an apparition, a revenant, a ghostly incarnation of voices long silent.

Two elderly women approached. One gently tugged at my sleeve.

*“My name is Lucy. We knew your grandmother. She used to call us into her kitchen on our way home from school.”*

*“She used to give us Buchterln fresh out of the oven. She loved to bake.”*

*“Mitzi, do you remember a thin kind of bread she gave us just before Easter?”*

*“Oh yes. That was good. Especially when she smeared it with goose fat. But I don’t remember what she called it.”*

I knew immediately. It was Matzos, the unleavened bread eaten during the week of Passover. How ironic that she would remember the item of food that was perhaps the only way in which my grandparents celebrated their Judaism.

Meanwhile, the well-dressed gentleman had introduced himself. Alois Bayer. He offered to show me around. Pointing to an empty lot overgrown with weeds that lay just behind the church, he declared this to be where the house of the “lower Waldsteins” had stood. The lower Waldsteins? Who were they? I had never heard “upper” or “lower” used before my family name. Alois was eager to fill me in.

*“The lower Waldsteins were your grandfather’s brother and his family. Their house was at the bottom of the hill, which is why we called them the lower Waldsteins. Their son Erich and I were best buddies. The two of us were motorcycle mad. We used to spend every spare moment repairing and riding the machines we cobbled together from old parts that nobody wanted.”*

I stood dumbstruck. My grandfather had had a brother, right here in this village. My father had had an uncle and an aunt and cousins and had grown up with them in this very place, yet he had never spoken of them.

Now it was Alois who was eager for information.

*“Do you know what happened to Erich? Is he alive? What about his brother Walter?”*



Alois (right) talks to a villager in Strobnitz

His questions drove home the enormity of all that had been lost. I knew so little of my father's family, and what little I knew came from the letters. Cousins and an uncle and aunt living in the very same village! I was eager to learn more and agreed to join the group at a coffee shop in the next town.

Unlike the welcoming places I had enjoyed in Austria and Germany, the *Kaffeehaus* was nothing but a rundown roadside tavern. It was a shabby structure whose dark interior reeked of stale smoke. Seated on uncomfortable wooden chairs, we gathered around tables too small for our numbers. The menu featured only one item: *Palatschinka*. Many in our group were already digging into plates of the jam-filled pancakes. We did have a choice of beverage: beer or coffee.

Alois suggested that beer would be a better choice. Beer is plentiful and good in this part of the world that gave birth to Pilsner and Budweiser. However, the combination of lukewarm beer and cloyingly sweet *Palatschinka*, especially in the crowded, smoke-filled room closed up my

gullet. I sat pushing the rubbery roll from side to side, listening to the din of voices in a culture where everyone talks at once. I had so much to think about, yet so much still to ask.

We agreed to meet up again with the group for dinner in Austria. Alois told us to follow him as he wove along country roads, stopping only at a border crossing manned by a single guard whom he seemed to know well, and then continuing directly to a picturesque Bavarian-style restaurant. We were back in Austria. Flowers cascaded voluminously from boxes and balconies. Rich cooking smells greeted us, along with the cheerful sounds of an accordion. There were even red-checked cloths on all the tables, as well as the usual assortment of cuckoo clocks and stag heads between the alpine scenes that covered every inch of the log walls. A welcoming place, or so it seemed initially.

At first, a number of individuals came by our table to speak to me. One man introduced himself as “the village chronicler,” and asked if I would like him to send me a copy of his history of Strobnitz. I said I would be delighted. Still, I felt uneasy. Jumbled thoughts filled my mind.

Where were these people when my family was taken away? Were some of these people the looters Tini had described? I remembered her words: *“They all came, the people from the village of Strobnitz, even the people to whom your grandfather had been kind, the people to whom he had given credit when they couldn’t pay their accounts. Now they came to steal whatever they could lay their hands on.”*

Certainly, no one in this festive group wanted to remember the Jews and what had happened to them. I sensed a shrinking back as I continued to ask questions. These people had attended the same village school as Martha and Elsa and Arnold and Otto and my father. They had played together and had grown up side by side. Had they also been among the neighbours who came to fill their arms with towels and sheets, with pots and pans, with whatever had been left behind? Had one of these grey-haired women raided my grandmother’s kitchen? Had someone stirred his morning coffee with one of our spoons? At the very least, each person here had pretended not to know.

I looked at Tracey and saw that she understood.

"We'll go whenever you like," she said softly.

Alois saw us rise, and bustled over.

"You cannot leave now. You have not even eaten yet. Did you order?"

"No. Our server has been busy bringing steins of beer. We haven't even seen a menu."

"But where will you go? To a hotel? Everything for miles around is filled with our group. You will not find a bed anywhere. You must stay at my house. Come to the mill. I will phone my wife and tell her to expect you."

"But that would be an imposition. Would you even have room for three?"

Someone snickered.

"We have lots of space at the mill. Besides, I want to show you some of the pictures in my photo album tomorrow. You must do this, because I cannot leave now and I want to tell you more about the past."

And so, we found ourselves once again following Alois' directions, along the road to a turn-off through the woods. We wove among the trees, the lights of Martin's Mini barely illuminating the long, deeply rutted path.

A dog barked. The car rumbled over a wooden bridge and rolled to a stop. A door opened and a grey-haired woman stood framed in the light. She descended the stairs and approached, still drying her hands on an apron as she walked. She opened my door and I saw a radiant face framed with grey hair swept back into a knot. A mature face, wise and welcoming.

This was Lotte. She sensed my emotional exhaustion and took us directly to our quarters, a converted mill opposite the main house. We mounted the stone stairs and entered a high-beamed living room with deep comfortable sofas lit by the warm glow of reading lamps. Open doors led to several bedrooms. In the centre was a table with a thermos and carafes and covered plates of food.

"I thought you'd be tired and might like privacy tonight. Tomorrow at breakfast, I will welcome you properly in the main house. Then we can talk."

I looked again at her beautiful face and remembered the portrait of an angel on my bedroom wall back in Canada.

We slept soundly and wakened to warm sunshine and the susurrus of water running over the dam almost below our floorboards. Lotte was already in her garden, watching for us as she plucked and snipped. In the

main house, our coffee awaited, along with platters of cheese and Wurst and real rye bread and butter. The aroma of a freshly baked coffeecake wafted invitingly from the sideboard. Alois was already at the round table with its crisp blue and white cloth, waiting impatiently as he leafed through photo albums and papers.

He hovered restlessly as we got acquainted with Lotte, who had her own tale to tell. Many years before, she had fled from the former Yugoslavia, eager to leave both communism and the centuries of hatred between groups barely held together by the magnetism of a single charismatic dictator. Croatia, Kosovo. Serbia. Even as we spoke, “the Allies” were bombing bridges and killing innocent civilians in an effort to oust Milosevic, the latest dictator. Lotte’s own sons were being asked to kill people who had once been their neighbours, people with whom they had gone to school, people who had been their soccer mates and friends. History was being written not in abstract concepts but in blood not far away

At last, Alois got his turn. He had found memorabilia of himself and my cousin Erich. Again he told us that they had been motorcycle buddies, and that as teens, they had spent every spare moment repairing bent wheels and discarded parts in order to create the roaring machines that were their passion. Martin and Tracey asked all the right questions while I pondered the fact that I once had had cousins named Erich and Walter and that I had not even known it.

Alois led us back out to the mill and showed us his own private motorcycle collection. He was particularly proud of one that he said was exactly like the one that had been Eric’s proudest possession. I could but wonder when and how Alois acquired this machine.

Alois kept saying “*Ich war nur ein Bub. I was just a kid.*”

I was terribly uncomfortable. Later, Alois confided that he had been in the *Hitlerjugend*. “*We all were,*” he said. “*It was the norm. Everyone my age was in the Hitlerjugend.*”

I reflected once again upon the dangers of doing what everyone else is doing. Is it reasonable to expect a boy of thirteen to wonder what had happened to his friend rather than to rejoice at the acquisition of a new motorcycle? Is it reasonable to ask anyone to swim against the tide of mainstream

opinion? Walking in his shoes, would I have had the courage to stand alone?

My thoughts made me restless. Despite my interest in every word and every detail, I was also eager to leave. Fortunately, I had a train to catch.

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THE TRAIN I HAD PLANNED to catch would take me from Budweis to Prague. For most people, Budweis is simply the name of a popular beer. For me, it had always been just the specific place of my birth. On this Sunday afternoon, it seemed no more than a convenient place for Tracey and Martin to drop me off. I would take the train to Prague where I had agreed to meet Steve, and they would return to Linz to prepare for the working week.

My conscious mind had not registered the fact that my parents and I had taken that same train in 1938. Besides, I was still trying to digest the encounter in Strobnitz plus all that Alois had told me. My mind was elsewhere as Martin found his way through a maze of lanes with small industrial buildings, all uniformly grey and flat on this cloudy day. He parked near the railway station and we decided to use the remaining time to walk to the town square.

The town square of Budweis is enormous. It may not compare in actual size to the Place de la Concorde or to Saint Peter's square in Rome, but for a town the size of Budweis, it struck me as disproportionately large. No café tables with bright umbrellas lined its sides, and no pedestrians crossed that vast cobblestone stretch on this sunless Sunday afternoon. Suddenly, I imagined that I heard the sound of marching feet and saw the flash of polished black boots. I knew that this square had once trembled to the click of Nazi goosesteps and resonated with shouts of "*Heil Hitler!*" I wanted neither a final coffee nor a beer.

"*You two go home now,*" I told Tracey and Martin. "*Just get my suitcase out of the car and I'll wait for the train while you head back to Linz.*" Fortunately, they chose to ignore my advice.

I am not a hysterical person. I consider myself a rational adult. I do not have panic attacks. Still, the moment I set foot inside that cavernous station

with its high stone walls, I froze. I could not take a single step toward the dark tunnel that led to my track. What the mind did not remember, the body knew.

I began to weep. At first softly, and then hysterically. I could not breathe, I could not speak, I could not move. Just like my father must have done 60 years earlier, Martin scooped me in his arms and carried me to the track. I remember watching Tracey get on the train to find me a compartment. From the safety of Martin's arms, I saw her put my bags up on a rack. Still, I could not move. Only after the conductor called his "All Aboard" did I feel arms lift me up the steps to the corridor where I clung to a bar at the window as the train pulled out. I clung to that bar for hours, all the way to Prague, urging that train to go faster, pushing it forward with my last ounce of strength.



I COULD NOT BEAR TO BE alone that first evening in Prague. Fortunately, Rick's brother Fred had already arrived so that for a few hours, I was able to pretend that we were normal tourists. We wandered through the maze of narrow streets to the old town with its celebrated clock tower where the puppet Death chases the unwary with each chime of the hour. We checked out the restaurants and cafés, we ate a good meal and talked of our families safely at home in Canada.

The next morning, Rick and his partner joined us along with his cousin and her father. For several days, we played tourist, crossing the ancient Charles Bridge that spans the Vltava River, visiting the Hrad any Castle on the hill, checking out the souvenirs and pretending that Prague for us was merely an exquisite medieval city, a beautiful not-to-be-missed spot on the tourist trail.

One of the many must-see destinations in Prague is the old Jewish quarter. Because Jews had no Civil Rights until 1848 and because for centuries they had been confined to the ghetto and not allowed to live amongst their Christian neighbours, some 20,000 bodies had to be buried, body upon body in the tiny walled cemetery.

I watched as tour buses disgorged visitors to gape at the hodgepodge of leaning stone markers. I listened as tour guides described the strange and quaint customs of the Jews. I felt like a member of an extinct species. I shuddered as several tour guides brushed away the past as natural resentment because "*the Jews were rich.*" I thought of my family who had huddled a few blocks away with only the contents of a suitcase.

It was time for me to stop playing tourist. The next day, I went in search of an address I had brought with me. Number 32 Manesova, the address on the last letter from my father's brother, Arnold.

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NUMBER 32 MANESOVA IS an unmodernized apartment block with a heavy front door and neither nameplates nor a buzzer system. My only option was to sit on the step and wait. In due time, someone with a dog came home, and I unceremoniously inserted my foot before the door closed in my face. The man spoke neither English nor German nor French and my Czech is nil. I managed to convey the message that I was not going to leave. Eventually, he sighed, knocked on a downstairs door where he excitedly conferred with someone before stomping up the stairs to knock on another door. Soon, a woman descended and somewhat warily, approached.

She was the answer to my prayers. She had a degree from the Sorbonne as do I. French became for us the universal language it had once been for so many of the world's educated. She invited me upstairs to her apartment where I apologized for my brazen behaviour. I explained why I had seen no other option.

When I uttered the name Arnold Waldstein, she seemed to blanch. Piling coincidence upon coincidence, she told me that she knew his wife who until very recently had lived in the apartment just across the hall. Mme Waldstein had only recently been taken by her nephew to an old-age home where she had died. The apartment was now occupied by a new tenant.

From deep in the recesses of memory came the sound of my parents discussing the new woman in Arnold's life. Arnold must have married her. I explained to my hostess that when the letters from Arnold stopped, all my

questions about him went unanswered. Neither of my parents ever spoke another word about him.

The silence grew. An ancient grandfather clock on the wall ticked hypnotically, its pendulum swinging back and forth, back and forth. At last, my hostess spoke:

*“That was actually your uncle’s clock and this was actually his apartment.”*

I stared, dumbfounded.

*“Mme Waldstein didn’t want to live here anymore after her husband died. She had this big place and my husband and I were living with our children in the much smaller apartment across the hall. During the Communist days, it was impossible to get another apartment, so we simply traded. That is why her name is still in the phone book. It used to take ten years to get a new phone, so people simply kept what was in place and gave their friends the number.”*

As she rose to fetch the phone book, my thoughts skipped back to the letters I now knew by heart. After the war, Otto had gone back to Strobnitz and arranged for my parents’ furniture to be shipped to Arnold’s half-empty apartment. In his last letter, Arnold had written, *“the big buffet, three large chests, table, and sofa now grace my new apartment where they remind me constantly of my dear brother and his good wife Gretl.”*

I sat edgily on the sturdy sofa of the apartment at 32 Manesova. Had I once curled up on this cushion, listening to adult conversation? I stared at the heavy furniture that filled the room, but no memories surfaced. Perhaps my hostess knew what had happened to Arnold. Perhaps she could explain why there had been no more letters. I told her of my parents’ silence.

*“So you don’t know the end of the story? I never met your uncle. He died before I moved into the building. Mme Waldstein told me that she was his second wife. She knew that he had suffered greatly, but it was not something we talked about.”*

*“Did Mme Waldstein ever say anything about when or how he died? I wonder if his body was so weakened by what he went through in Auschwitz that he died soon after.”*

*“No, they had a number of years together. Happy years, according to Mme Waldstein. It’s another reason she didn’t want to live in this apartment any longer after what happened.”*

*“What do you mean? What happened?”*

*“Your parents never told you? You really don’t know? Mme Waldstein found him.”*

*“Found him?”*

*“Yes. He had come home early from work one day. She was not home yet and he decided to have a bath. Something went wrong in the pipes. Terribly wrong. Nobody knows how it happened. Gas came out. She found him dead in this very bathtub. Come, I will show you where it happened.”*

Gas. Auschwitz. They told people they were showers, but gas came out of the pipes. Numbly, I stared at the claw-footed tub, its enamel well worn in several spots. Several pipes ran up the wall and across the ceiling.

In silence, I followed my hostess back to the living room where she opened the glass door of a small china cabinet. There, she removed a very delicate cup and saucer and handed it to me.

*“Mme Waldstein painted china as a hobby. She gave me this. I think it is now your turn to have it.”*



THE NEXT DAY, I WENT BACK alone to the Jewish quarter. This time, my destination was the rather nondescript building that constitutes the Jewish Community Centre. A security guard checked my bag and I passed through a metal detector more sensitive than those at the airport. Inside, a few aging men were drinking coffee in the small restaurant. There appeared little here to warrant such scrupulous security.

Under the watchful eye of the guard, I mounted the stairs to an office where elderly women sat hunched over typewriters. The office was a warren of small cubicles, but soon, I found the right place. A kind woman directed me to a wall of drawers holding 4 x 6 file cards.

The cards bear the names of every Jew shipped from Prague to the concentration camps. As Arnold had written, every Jew remaining in Czechoslovakia was first sent to Prague before being dispatched to a concentration camp. Once the Jews were all assembled in one place, it had been easy to move them out, like shipments of goods. Indeed, each

card bears a “transport” number along with the last known address of the person.

It was here that I found the information I had not wanted to find. Here, on these green file cards, the name of every Jew had been recorded along with the date and number of the transport. It was important to keep track, to make sure that every Jew had been shipped out.

Some cards have dates of death; most do not. It was not important to keep track of when a Jew died.

The kind woman took all my file cards and made photocopies. She stamped each one, and signed it. *“That makes it an official record if you should ever need it.”* There was no charge for this service.

My quest had been successful, yet I felt more disoriented than ever. Once more, I found myself walking through the Jewish quarter. It was early in the day, but already the area was crammed with tour buses. With a desultory eye, I wandered through the museum, gazing at artefacts that once had graced Jewish homes, Sabbath candlesticks. Hand embroidered tablecloths. Good china. Silver menorahs. Had one of these come from my family’s home?

Adjacent to the museum is another ancient structure, this one empty except for the bronze plaques on its walls. The plaques are engraved with 77, 297 names. Each name is that of a Czech Jew killed in the Holocaust. I search for the handful of names that are “mine” while from a loudspeaker, a detached voice intones each name. I need not fear hearing the names repeated. It takes several days to complete the cycle.

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I KNEW WHERE I HAD to go next. There was no choice. Theresienstadt.

Theresienstadt, or Teresin as it is called in Czech, was once a concentration camp. Not a death camp like Auschwitz, the books hasten to add. Theresienstadt was “only” a concentration camp. It had no ovens and no gas chambers. It was simply the destination to which the Jews from Prague were shipped. It is true that many Jews died there, but this was an unfortunate consequence. Conditions were deplorable, but this was not Auschwitz.

Fred and the cousins stared, as if I were mad. They had no intention of going there. Rick and his partner hesitated, and then decided they too would stay in Prague. I understood, for I too had been uncertain that I could make the pilgrimage.

Because Theresienstadt is only an hour from Prague, there are many tour buses advertising this “unique opportunity” to see a concentration camp. For me, it was out of the question to join a group of tourists.

On foot, I made my way to the public bus station and checked out the schedule. The next bus left in an hour. Impatiently I wandered the nearby streets, willing the time to pass. At a small outdoor market, I spotted leather jackets made in China and realized that I was already chilled to the bone on this warm autumn day. I translated Kronen into dollars and found a green jacket that cost only seventeen dollars. I counted out the cash and snuggled into its comforting warmth.

When the bus arrived, I selected a seat near the front so that I could read the signs rather than rely on my ability to understand the bus driver. At last, I saw ahead the signboard: Teresin. To my left loomed a huge cross. A cross? I had expected a Star of David to mark the last earthly destination of so many Jews. I double-checked with the driver, but he nodded affirmatively. This was definitely Teresin.

A young couple dismounted with me. Shyly, they asked if they could walk with me, having noted that my linguistic skills were at least better than their own. I was pleased to have company. We crossed the spacious car park filled with tour buses. Many of the visitors were eating hot dogs or licking ice cream cones. Souvenir kiosks rimmed the car park.

We paid admission, picked up maps and passed under the red brick archway into the walled fortress. Above us, in bold yellow brick letters stood the famous words: ARBEIT MACHT FREI. I pulled the leather jacket more tightly across my chest.

We consulted the map and headed for the first barrack. It was empty, except for a narrow wooden bench bearing a few rusty tools. Other barracks stood empty. The carefully swept wood floors bore no trace of those who once filled these spaces. Other barracks had the tiered bunk beds where, sardine like, humans once slept head to toe.



Teresin concentration camp, where my grandparents along with most of my immediate family must have peered through the window bars, hoping, longing, despairing . . .

A long underground corridor came next. We entered it through a large stone cave with windows only at the very top. The guidebook says that the windows permitted some circulation of air as well as allowing the inhabitants to hear the ringing of the church bells that they could not see. The rest of the underground corridor overlooks windowless cells. Here, even further underground, is where “uncooperative inhabitants” were kept. By now, I was deeply grateful to the young couple who had adopted me. The young man had taken my arm to steady me as I stumbled through the lightless dungeon.

The guidebook stresses that this was not a place of mass killings, but that killing, of course, was sometimes necessary. When they had to shoot people, they also buried them. Those who merited a bullet merited a grave.

Those who died “a natural death” were simply cremated. Their ashes were dumped into the river that flows peacefully through the town.

Mutely I gazed at the river that absorbed the last trace of my grandmothers Fanny and Resl.

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MY COMPANIONS HAD HAD enough. I accompanied them to the bus stop. Alone, I walked through the town of Teresin. People were going about their business much as I imagined the townsfolk would have done during the war years. There were stores, playgrounds, and sidewalks with purposeful pedestrians. I found the very normalcy of life in Teresin as disconcerting as its history.

My footsteps took me to the museum where Jewish artifacts filled the display cases. There were yellow Star of David labels like the one Arnold so hated. There were confiscated passports and small photos of loved ones and copies of the ordinances that stripped the Jews of all human rights. Many of the exhibits tried to show the Czechs themselves as victims, but these were less convincing.

I had not imagined the scale of the camp, nor had I realized how many ordinary citizens had been needed for its daily operation. Countless willing Czech hands had reached out, ready to help execute the Nazi plan.

It was here in the museum that I found a wealth of unimagined material. I marvelled that so much had been preserved. Children’s drawings collected into a book entitled *I Never Saw a Butterfly*. I had not realized that many children spent years without catching a glimpse of the outside world. I thought they had all been gassed immediately. I searched and searched for a drawing signed “Ilslerl,” but there was none.

I was particularly fascinated by the videotape of an old black and white film called *The Town the Nazis Gave to the Jews*. I played and replayed the tape. The film had been made to calm international protests that surfaced when the rumours of death camps became too numerous to ignore. For the film, they dressed children and adults in borrowed finery. They imported props for a theatre, a concert hall, a coffee house and for other pleasurable



Some of the skeletons in mass graves were dug up after the war and buried with numbered headstones. Like my grandmothers Fanny and Resl, most who perished in Teresin became ashes dumped into the river flowing peacefully along the edge of town.

activities. Members of the International Red Cross were invited to see how well the Jews of Theresienstadt were being treated. The members of the International Red Cross saw no reason to look behind the scenes. The props worked, and the Red Cross delegates reported that all was well. Relieved that nothing need to be done for the Jews, the world went back to sleep for a while longer.

