Searching for Family
One Last Time

The past may be history, but my history is still open for revision. To revise is to view again, to see with fresh eyes. It is not yet over.

Nor is my quest. To learn, to understand, to come to grips with the past. With my past.

Until it is done, the past cannot be laid to rest.

And so, in 2004, I went once more to Europe, this time not really wanting to go. There was much that I still did not want to face both in Europe and in myself. It was my longing for family, no matter how distant, that drew me. American cousins with whom I share a great-grandmother on my mother’s side were planning a “roots” trip to Tachau (not Dachau, as I first feared), home to my grandmother Resl’s sister. I looked on a map of the Czech Republic and found Tachau to be in the northwest corner of the former Bohemia. Far from my home in Strobnitz, yet close enough to include me as a member of the clan.
Reading the email discussion of wording for the plaque that the cousins were planning to erect in Tachau awakened in me the rage that had fallen dormant since my last visit to the Czech Republic. I could not agree to the suggested wording: *In Memory of the Jews of Tachau: Our Mothers, Fathers, Sisters, Brothers Who Died under Nazi Oppression.*

*Died?* For me, the word was too euphemistic. Why not say *killed*? Or *murdered*? Or *slaughtered like cattle*? Or even *exterminated like vermin*? My rage knew no bounds. “Why are we being so respectful of the feelings of the Czechs?” I asked. “Did they not jump at the chance to do the Nazis’ dirty work? Had they not willingly plundered and profiteered in the state sanctioned pillage?”

Anger accompanied me all the way to Marienbad where our group was staying in a resplendently renovated hotel in a town that can only be called idyllic. Its rococo mansions sit nestled in a valley of green, its myriad parks, gazebos, and outdoor cafés beckon invitingly. Like many others, my parents had chosen Marienbad for their honeymoon.

I was excited at the prospect of meeting new relatives that evening. Our dinner was a splendid affair in a picture-perfect setting of crisp white linen, heavy silver candelabra holding trios of flickering tapers, and fresh flowers nestled among the sparkling crystal goblets. Waiters bearing trays of champagne moved smoothly among the assembled group. As each of us stepped forward to say our name, there was a spark of connection that ignited. For me, it was a moment so precious that like Goethe’s Faust, I longed to halt the fleeting moment and to call out “*Verweile doch! Du bist so schön!*” At long last, instead of feeling alien and outcast, I recognized myself in the other.

Next morning a bus arrived to ferry our group the short distance to Tachau where a reception at City Hall awaited. As we entered, sweet music greeted us. The local girls’ choir, little blond heads serenading the return of the Jews. I was touched by the loveliness of their angelic voices but sadly aware that this was not my music. Both the language and the melodies were indelibly Czech. Did the dapper choirmaster who bowed so obsequiously ever wonder whether the Jews of his town had had their own songs they loved to sing?
Near Marienbad, where romantic ruins from a distant past provide a welcome escape from recent realities.
I was equally unmoved by the pompously inflated platitudes of the mayor whose heavy badge of office dangled ostentatiously from a multi-coloured ribbon. The mayor was not a man given to soul searching. I feared that the plaque we had presented would soon lie buried in a dusty cupboard.

I was happier out of doors where a goat grazed on someone’s lawn and a cat dozed in a sun-kissed window box. An elderly woman with an empty straw basket on her arm interrupted her journey to the market to ask why a busload of visitors had come to this small town. Her first words were Czech, but suddenly, she reverted to German.

“I was here,” she tells us, “here in this town when everything happened. I knew the family. I knew the parents and I knew the children. I remember when they all left too.”

Because I was one of the few German speakers in this American group, she took my hand and spoke directly to me.

TODAY I SIT AT MY COMPUTER remembering not a word of what this nameless elderly woman said. My mind remains a total blank. I only know that at some point I broke away from her and from the group, that I leaned against a rough stone wall where I wept uncontrollably.

What is it that moved me so deeply that my mind cannot hold the memory? Something of this woman’s humanity, something of her very ordinary averageness penetrated my defences.

I came to Tachau laden with anger at those Czechs who sold their honour yet now feigned victimization by both the Germans and the Communists. My anger fed on the awareness that some of these self-proclaimed victims had profited greatly from their complicity. Some were now living in the very homes from which our relatives had been forced to flee.

But how can I possibly feel anger at this kind, simple, grey-haired woman, probably no better and no worse than any other? But if not at her, at whom shall I then direct my fury? Systems, institutions, and even Hitler
are all too easy to blame. When does this become an excuse to absolve the individual from his or her own personal responsibility?

And yet, my bottom line has long been that it is wrong to lump together all members of any group. That is precisely what the Nazis did. That is precisely the thinking of racists everywhere. Much as we deplore the actions of certain members of any country, religion, or cultural group, it is wrong to tar everyone with the same brush.

I cannot find it in my heart to hate this woman who at the very least may have looked the other way. Somehow, she brings home to me that we are all human. I know that I am not always smart enough, wise enough, or strong enough to do the right thing. I do not know how I would have reacted in those war years. Would I have risked my life and that of my loved ones to protect a neighbour?

IT WAS WITH SUCH THOUGHTS pulsing through my head that I continued my journey.

In the years since my first visit, Alois Bayer, whom I had met in front of the church in Strobnitz, had several times phoned and written to me. He wanted to take me back to Strobnitz and anywhere else that I would like to go. I feared that his agenda was neither altruism nor affection for me, but I accepted the fact that his command of Czech and his business-like manner could open doors that would otherwise remain locked to me.

We did go back to Strobnitz, but even his assertiveness could not crack the passive non-compliance of the staff in the archives. There were no records to be had. Alois was deeply disappointed, and he urged me to try other avenues, including writing to former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, whose Czech family had hidden their own Jewish connection in order to protect her.

In another town, Krumlau, we had greater success. Here I found numerous items indicating that Emil Urbach had been a leading figure in the Department of Health and the owner of a gracious home nearby.
Further records indicated that Krumlau was the site of Martha and Emil Fränkel’s marriage. The certificate bears the signatures of Emil Urbach and of my grandfather, Josef Waldstein.

When we stopped for afternoon coffee, Alois told me more of his own life in the late thirties. He had remembered many more incidents about his years in the Hitlerjugend. He saw them as humorous, as boyish hijinks. I listened, stone-faced. Despite my efforts not to condemn, the gap between us grew. It was with relief that I waved goodbye to Alois in Budweis where I had asked him to drop me off.

I spent the evening alone and the night in a hotel opposite the train station where I had so totally lapsed into hysteria on my last visit. I had to prove to myself that I was not enslaved to childhood memories. I needed to face my demons.

The next day, I calmly took the train to Prague.

In Prague too, I had unfinished business. I had become so accustomed to hearing that everyone in my immediate family had been consigned to the flames that I had not given proper thought to what had happened to Arnold. I had been to Prague without once thinking to look for a grave. It was time.

Early Sunday morning, I rode the Prague subway almost to the end of the line. The underpass led to high walls and a gate. The New Jewish Cemetery. For the first time, I realized that Jewish cemeteries have a common denominator—high walls and gates to protect them from those who would deface and destroy.

A helpful volunteer in a tiny office at the entrance offered to look up my uncle’s name. I quickly accepted both his help and his offer to look up all Waldsteins and to give me a printout. To my surprise, there were thirty-two Waldstein names on the list, all buried in this cemetery since its inception in 1891. To my disappointment, there were no familiar names. When I looked at the dates, I understood. There had been so many Waldsteins, but only those who died before 1939 had merited a grave.
There was only a single entry for the post-war years. Arnold and Lota Waldstein.

Grasping my printout, I walked down the long gravel path. Section. Row. Plot Number. Then I saw it. Section 23, Plot Number 14, in the very first row. A simple grey stone barely visible beneath the overgrown ivy.


I fell weeping to the ground. I lay there for a long time. I cried out a grief that knew no words.

I wept that my father had never crossed the ocean to embrace his brother. I wept that a life had ended so absurdly just when the shadowy hope of happiness had begun to grow. I wept for the uncle I have come to know only through his letters. A man who might have smiled at my struggles and understood. A man whose lessons in living could have taught me so much.

I wept at my own stupidity. Although I was barely fifteen in 1951, I could have urged my father to go to Europe. I could have begged him to send Arnold and Lota a return ticket to Canada. In 1951, I was still too self-absorbed for such thoughts.

What was my excuse in 1990? Why did I not think to ask what had become of Arnold’s widow? How could I have remained so unaware? I remember those post-war years and my parents’ disappointment that Arnold had opted to remain in Europe. I even remember the upset caused by his decision to remarry. Were my parents capable of understanding Arnold?

I wept because the sense of loss was so overwhelming. My personal loss, but also the world’s loss. Six million Arnolds with no grave. What contributions large and small could they have made? Who might have found the cure for a dread disease? Who might have lit just one small candle in the dark?