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# **CLOSE CALL WITH NONEXISTENCE: A MEMOIR**

By

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Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in Creative Writing, Creative Nonfiction  
The University of Montana  
Missoula, MT

May 2016

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Close Call With Nonexistence: A Memoir

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## ABSTRACT

Fred Eduard Gailus was born on April 26, 1944, in Memelland, a place that no longer exists. It was a tiny sliver of Germanism on the far eastern edge of Hitler's oversized German Reich. When the Soviet Red Army swept through on their way to Berlin, to end World War Two and the reign of terror perpetrated by the German people, the homeland of my father's ancestors was wiped off the map forever. Thanks to the courage and tenacity of his mother, Fred survived the largest forced migration in human history to marry young and raise a family of four children in Canada. *Close Call With Nonexistence* is a piercing memoir by Fred's oldest son, Jeff, who is wracked by grief when Fred dies suddenly of a heart attack. At once poignant and comical, *Close Call* explores their troubled father-son relationship as Jeff tries to come to terms with his paternal relatives' participation in the Holocaust and how the war affected his father.

For Makaila and Ylva.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This project, which I hope to publish as a book one day, could not have been attempted without the support of a great number of people and organizations. I'd like to thank the University of Montana's Creative Writing faculty, especially Judy Blunt and David Gates. Their patience and insight have made me twice the writer I was when I started the program. I'm also grateful for the financial support from the University of Montana, in the form of a Bertha Morton Scholarship, and for a Ridge Scholarship from the Ridge Library. My wife, Ylva Lekberg, deserves more gratitude than I can possibly give for her undying and unconditional support; I couldn't have done this without her. And, of course, my utmost appreciation to my mother and father, Andrea and Fred, and their ancestors, whose lives are bricks in the foundation of my own story.

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## INHERITANCE

**Makaila and I** rose early to fish the Bitterroot River during the promising light of daybreak. She lived with her mother in Washington, D.C., and I hadn't seen her in six months. She'd just turned 13 and had flown alone for the first time, which was much more distressing for me than it was for her. I can't tell you how relieved I was to see her walk through the gate at the Missoula airport. When we hugged, I could tell she'd grown an inch or two since Christmas. I asked her how the flight was, whether she'd been scared or nervous. "Oh Dad," she said, rolling her eyes. "It was fine."

In a fortnight we would meet my father and mother and the rest of the Gailus clan for our annual summer gathering, but the next two weeks were ours to enjoy together. My favorite memories of my father almost all involve fishing, so I wanted to make damn sure I took her fishing, too. By 7:30 a.m. we were standing on the high cutbank of the Blue Lagoon, peering down into my favorite backwater on the Bitterroot River. The surface lay smooth and clear, a window into a deep pool where the bronzed bodies of cutthroats cruised like small sharks. It was July 12, a Friday. As I look back to reconcile the hours, the nurse must have opened the door to my father's hospital room about the same time Makaila and I arrived at the water's edge. We didn't know it, but he had been admitted to the Squamish General Hospital the night before with pneumonia. He had been suffering



the consequences of Type II diabetes for more than a decade, and had been in and out of the hospital many times during the last year. His heart was working at 25 percent, and my mother and siblings and I knew that it could give out at any moment. The doctors wanted to keep an eye on him while they administered heavy doses of intravenous antibiotics. He was sleeping when the nurse entered the room to check his vitals. His breathing was strong, his mouth turned up into a small smile. Everything seemed fine. She decided to come back later, when he was awake.

I hoisted Makaila with my left arm and grabbed our fishing poles in my right and waded over to the sand bar that separates the lagoon from the river proper. She chose a lure—a gold Thomas Bouyant with red and white spots that she said looked like jewelry—and I readied her line just as my father had done for me forty years before, tying on the snap-swivel with an improved clinch knot and clipping the shiny spoon in place. Then we stood side-by-side and cast back toward the cutbank in silent unison. A family of ducks paddled by and a heron beat its lazy wings. The rising sun warmed our faces. As my father lay dying, we cast, retrieved, and cast again.

Her rod tip bowed to the water's surface, where a trout dashed out toward a submerged tree stump shaped like a corpse. "I've got one!"

"Rod tip up." I said. "Up! And don't stop reeling!"

I watched proudly as she fought the fish, then backed up on the cobbled shore and dragged its glittering body to the river's edge. It was a fourteen-inch cutthroat, the copper-red slash gleaming on its jaw. About the same size as the first fish I had caught in Elkwater Lake with my father's help, all those years ago. I removed the hook and invited her to return the fish to the river.

She hesitated. “Why? We caught it.”

“It’s wild,” I said. “If everyone kept all the ones they caught, there would be none left.”

She submerged her hands and grabbed the wriggling fish, then released it and watched it dart into the safety of the shadows.

By 9:00 a.m. we had landed a half-dozen fish, and the nurse had returned to my father’s room. He was still smiling, but his chest was no longer rising and falling. She checked his pulse, found nothing.

When Makaila and I pulled into the driveway 30 minutes later, the sun was high, its heat pulsing through the windshield. A red-tail hawk flew overhead, a six-foot bull snake dangling limp in its talons. I glanced in the rearview mirror and saw my wife, Ylva, walking out to meet us with her cell phone in her hand. Her face looked grimmer than I’d ever seen it. I already knew what she knew.

“Your Mom called,” she said through the open window.

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” I said, without thinking.

She reached to touch my arm, and I leaned my head against the steering wheel. Turned to look at Makaila, I saw tears rolling down her cheeks. This was her first encounter with a death in her family, and neither of us was prepared for it. This was her first encounter with familial death, and neither of us was prepared for it.

I hadn’t seen my father since November, when my parents had come to Missoula for a visit. He had been in and out of the hospital ever since, for countless tests and repeated surgeries to improve his circulation, and one of his feet had swollen to the size

of a football. We spoke on the phone at regular intervals, but we rarely ventured beyond small talk. Cold up, here, he'd say. And rainy. But summer's on the way.

He had known about his diabetes for at least ten years, perhaps even twenty, but had refused to take the drugs that would have kept it in check. He had said he would change his diet and get more exercise, but he did not, and by the time he agreed to medication it was too late. His pathological optimism infuriated me, and I resented his turning my mother into a full-time caregiver. But this was not the time to reproach him. When I asked what he was going to do now that his heart was so compromised, he assured me everything would be fine. There was no need to travel to Squamish, he said. It had been that way for years, and the doctors were doing their best to fix it. "We're all meeting in Idaho in a month," he said. "I think we'll be alright. We can see each other then."

Now he was gone, two weeks too soon, and I realized I would never see his face or hear his voice again. We had been combatants, for the most part, but I wanted him to know how much I loved him. But of course it was too late for that, and I was afraid of what came next.

I called my mother and she explained what had happened. He had caught a cold the previous weekend, and it had gotten progressively worse. But even when the cough and the sweats and the near-delirium came, he refused her pleas to go to the hospital. He was tired of the hospital, he said, tired of the waiting and the bad food and the ineffective interventions. It was just a cold, he said. Everything would be fine.

My mother called my sisters, Alison and Erika, who drove the 45 minutes from Vancouver and begged him to go to the hospital. Just when they had decided to call the ambulance without his consent, he acquiesced.

“Fine,” he said. “If you want me to go, I’ll go.”

The fever subsided, and the color returned to his cheeks. My mother and Alison visited him in the hospital the night before he died. He joked with the nurses, and they told him he was their favorite patient. Everything seemed fine. At the end of visiting hours, my mother bent to kiss his forehead. He told her he’d see her in the morning.

“He was my best friend,” she told me over the phone. “Every moment of every day for forty-seven years, he was my best friend. What will I do without him?”

I couldn’t help but think her life would be easier. She had become his full-time caregiver, and his diabetes would only have gotten worse. Had he lived, the doctors would probably have had to amputate his feet, which would have left my mother forever ferrying him to and from his doctor appointments. And he would have hated being so dependent. It was time for him to go, and I have a sense he knew it, too. For better and for worse, he had lived his life on his own terms right up until the end, and perhaps he couldn’t bear to burden my mother any longer. So after a good night’s sleep he put on a smile, to remind my mother how happy she had made him, and left the hospital for good.

**My father had signed** away his body to science, but during the rash of surgeries and hospital stays over the last 14 months, he had contracted methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA). The doctor at the university hospital told my mother they could not take his body; it was considered a toxic waste. They removed only his

eyes, so his corneas could be transplanted. Then Fred Eduard Gailus's 220-pound body was incinerated at 1700 degrees Fahrenheit and transformed into a pile of calcium phosphate ash that weighed all of two pounds.

I had no idea what he wanted us to do with his remains—like most things it was never discussed—but I assumed he and my mother had made plans to be buried (or scattered) in the same place. Instead, a few months before his death, he had told my mother he wanted to be laid to rest beside his parents in Scarborough, Ontario, not far from where he had grown up. “I was dumbfounded,” she said. “I told him that I sure as hell wasn't going to be buried beside Oma and Opa.” After 47 years of marriage, it felt like he was abandoning her and moving back in with his parents—but if you knew the story of his life, his whole life, it begins to make more sense, for you can only know a man truly if you know where he came from.

Nonetheless, she said she would honor his wishes. Most of the ashes would go to Scarborough, and the rest would find their way to a few places that had been important to my father and, especially, my mother. The first of these was Hauser Lake, where we had rented a cabin for our Gailus family getaway. We had talked about whether to cancel it—it was only two weeks after his death—but plans had been made and deposits paid, and we told ourselves that Fred would want us to carry on. My mother said she would bring some of him with her, so we could have a little memorial and scatter his ashes. It seemed strange to sprinkle a little of Fred in a lake he had never seen, but I think the idea offered some consolation to my mother, an opportunity to thumb her nose at Death and allow Fred to follow through, in a way, with the plans he had made with the family.

There were 14 of us: Ylva and I; Makaila and her cousin Lauren; my brother Chris and his wife Jane and their new infant son, Will; my two sisters, Alison and Erika, and their sons, two each, Alex and Sebastian, and Kohlton and Braeden. And, of course, my mother, Andrea. The weather was hot and sunny, and we swam and fished for four days. After supper on our penultimate day, Andrea herded us all down to the dock for a little ceremony. As the sun slid toward the horizon behind her, we shaded our eyes against the fierce light and waited for her to start. “I thought we could each share a little story about Opa,” she said, brandishing the little gold tin that held what was left of his corporeal being, “a fond memory of some kind. I’ll start.” But just as she began to tell how she had met Fred, two jet-skis roared into the bay behind us. I could see my mother’s lips moving, but I could hear only the obliterating whine of engines revving at spectacular RPMs. Andrea carried on as if she were deaf, and the rest of us stole quick glances at each other. The whole thing felt like a Coen brothers’ movie.

After the jet-skis had moved on, Andrea asked the boys what they remembered about their opa. Sebastian, age four, mentioned a time Opa had taken him fishing. His brother Alex, six, spoke about his love of baseball. Kohlton, also six, remembered going to the Vancouver aquarium to see the beluga whales and seals. Braeden, though, couldn’t think of anything to say.

While the other adults spoke I stared out at the empty lake and sifted through the card catalogue of my memory for an anecdote that would capture the essence of the man. Our trip back to East Prussia? The time he didn’t kill me for smashing up his brand-new new Buick while on a drunken joyride when I was 15? The time I told him right to his face that he was fucking stupid? (How I hated myself for that night.) But this was a

memorial not a confessional; we were here to honor the man. Ah, yes, the hockey story....

“Jeff?” my mother said. “It’s your turn. Everyone else has gone.”

“Yeah, sorry. Just trying to think of something to say. Remember when I was 15,” I said. “And Dad coached my hockey team?”

I was 15 years old and in the tenth grade. I hadn’t played organized hockey in ten years and could hardly skate, but I decided I wanted to play. My father tried to talk me out of it, but when I insisted he made me promise that it wouldn’t be another one of those expensive hobbies that was quickly forgotten. If he was going to buy equipment and pay for ice time, it had better be for more than year.

The season was a disaster. My teammates came to games high on LSD and spent most of their time in the penalty box. One of the players, a redheaded French Canadian, would get into fist fights with his father after games. It was so bad our coach up and quit. Even though he could hardly skate, Fred volunteered to coach. Somehow he earned my teammates’ respect and convinced them to give up their thuggery. We limped our way to the end of the season, losing almost every game; still it was a victory of sorts.

I put my hockey equipment away for the summer and hoped I would never have to put it on again. But I had made a promise. Just before registration in the fall, I summoned the courage to ask my father how he would feel if I didn’t play hockey again.

“I thought you’d never ask,” he said.

My mother and I looked at each other, and she smiled a knowing smile. We both knew those had been difficult years, and we had admitted to each other that we would

have done things differently if we could. But I'd never figured out how to have such conversations with my father, and of course it was too late for that now.

Once we'd shared our memories, Andrea knelt down on the dock and pried the lid off the gold tin. She held it over the water and said a short prayer, the words coming slowly as she fought off tears. The woman on the next dock looked over, realized what was going to happen, and ran for her cabin. She needn't have worried. When Andrea emptied the tin, the ashes blew back in her face and settled in the water on the other side of the dock.

"Oh dear," my mother said as she wiped her eyes and lips. "That's a little closer than I'd hoped to get."

**In August**, my mother and I flew to Toronto to inter Fred's ashes in the Hillside Cemetery in Scarborough. When we arrived at the gravesite we found a crowd of relatives and old family friends arrayed in an arc around three granite headstones:

Magdalena Marie Gailus nee Klein, Born 1904 (Heydekrug, East Prussia), Died 2005 (Canmore, Alberta).

Max Gailus, Born 1910 (Russ, East Prussia), Died 1980 (Dania Beach, Florida).

Fred Eduard Gailus, Born 1944 (Ortelsburg, East Prussia), Died 2013 (Squamish BC).

My mother and I stood off to the side with the minister. Arrayed before us in a semicircle were a few old friends and two dozen or so relatives from the Toronto area, people I hadn't seen for decades. There was Gary Culverson, the best man at my parents'



wedding, and Larry Pearson, my dad's best friend in Calgary while I was growing up. In the front were Magdalena's younger brothers, Uncle Fritz and Uncle Kurt, who had sponsored Oma and my father to emigrate from Germany after the war. And, of course, a flock of cousins whose names I could hardly remember.

After a short service by the minister, my mother untied the red ribbon and opened the white box that held my father's ashes, which she coaxed into the hole. A small man in dungarees approached with a shovel. I stepped forward and grabbed it out of his hand. "That's okay," I said. "I'll do it." He nodded and backed away. My midnight blue suit stretched across my shoulders as I bent to the task of burying my father. I thought of our conflicted relationship and all the things he had done for me over the years, and of the long journey he had taken to get here, and the tears streamed down my cheeks and into the dirt. I could see the old German relatives nodding their heads in approval: The first-born son laying his father to rest.

Uncle Kurt leaned on his cane and unfolded himself from his chair. "I vuz in zee choir at church," he said. "Maybe I can sing a little hymn."

I barely recognized him. He was so thin and frail he could hardly keep himself upright, but he insisted on standing up to belt out a solo in German. "Ahh," he said when he was done, shaking his head. "I can't reach zee high notes like I used to."

When he was done, my mother crouched to put a red rose on the bare earth.

**A month after Makaila** had returned to Washington, DC, she called to say she had just seen *The Book Thief*, the cinematic version of Markus Zusak's award-winning book about a young orphan girl in Nazi Germany. Narrated by Death, it is a story about a

young girl coming to terms with Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Over the years I had told Makaila what little I knew about where my father and his parents had come from in Germany and how they ended up in Canada. But it obviously wasn't enough. Zusak's imaginative depiction of the horrors of National Socialism from the perspective of a girl her age had piqued her curiosity, and she told me she wanted to know more about what life was like for my father and the rest of the family before and during the Second World War.

“Were they Nazis?” she asked. I said I didn't think so, that it was hard for me to believe that these people, who I'd known and loved my whole life, could have done the things she had read about. But I was honest with her. “I don't know, Mak. I just don't know.”

The history of mid-twentieth century Germany is a dark subject, but I was happy she wanted to know more. I was about her age, perhaps a couple of years younger, when I became obsessed with my paternal family's history. None of my siblings expressed much interest (and don't, even now), nor did my father or any of his parents or aunts and uncles and cousins, in Germany or in Canada. Even though he was born on the far eastern edge of the Greater German Reich and spent the most formative years of his life as a refugee in what is now southern Germany, Opa cared nothing for the past; it was a foreign country he had no desire to visit. He looked only to the future, failing to realize, perhaps, that they are one and the same thing.

## GENESIS

There comes a moment in every boy's life when his father's façade is shattered by some irreconcilable deception. For Robert Bly, it was the Vietnam War that turned America's sons against their sires. The young men of the '60s felt betrayed for being sent into the jungle to become murderers while their fathers lied about the nature of the war from the safety of their offices and living rooms. My best friend in high school knew it early and hard, when his father preached fealty and responsibility but never filled the fridge with food. Geoffery Woolf's moment came when, as a boy, he realized that his charismatic father, Duke, was a self-denying "bullshit artist" destined for the penitentiary. Everything changes when the veil is lifted.

My time came on a hot summer afternoon in a dark corner of our bungalow's basement. I pulled down a Bible-like tome with the words "Second World War" embossed in gold onto the black-cloth cover. I had borrowed it from a middle-school friend my parents didn't particularly like and hidden it on the far end of the bottom shelf, where it was invisible in the darkness. My parents and siblings weren't home that day, and Nicolas, whose book I held in my hands, was playing racquetball with his police detective dad at his downtown apartment complex. I was bored, and when boredom stole into the room I liked to disappear into a book, which helped abate my persistent anxiety, always sizzling in the background.

The Second World War held me in its thrall because my father had recently explained that he and his parents had survived it in heroic fashion. Up until this point they were all reluctant to discuss it, but it was obvious that we were different from most of our friends and the families around us. I knew by then his parents were German, that he was a German, that we were all, in our own particular way, German. Oma and Opa spoke nothing but German to each other, and my Dad always spoke German to them. When Oma and Opa spoke English to me, they had a harsh accent that differed from the Danes down the street. We ate German food—Rolladen, rot Kohl, Schinken—at most of our meals. Worst of all, I had been forced to wear lederhosen—German-made leather shorts a la Hansel and Gretel—to school, which earned me no end of grief from my classmates. Our Germanness was everywhere, and yet nobody talked about what it meant to German.

One day my relentless pestering pried my father's shell open just enough for me to scavenge what has become their Genesis story. He sat me down in the living room and, with the solemnity of a confession, told me the story that his mother had told to him:

They were Germans who had come to Canada from a faraway place called Memelland, on the far eastern edge of East Prussia. He described their homeland as a paradise full of linden trees and evangelical Lutherans. He always emphasized they were *not* peasant farmers, but hard working, middle-class butchers—merchants!—who were sometimes called upon to fill the king's larder at the castle in nearby Konigsberg. They worked six days a week, and on Sundays they attended church and took the horse and buggy down to the Baltic Sea to have a picnic on the beach. All was storied ideal.

My father was three months old and fatherless when the Soviets began to amass on the border. His mother was 40 and without a husband. Every German woman lived in constant fear, he said, for they had heard rumors of what would happen if they were still around when the Russians broke through the German lines. One day, word spread that the last train to Germany was loading passengers, women and children and the old and infirm. Magdalena wrapped her infant son in blankets and filled a stroller with some clothes and food. But by the time she got to the station the train was already full. She pushed her way to the front of the crowd but there was no room for her and her son.

Just as the doors began to close, an old man pushed them apart and stepped off the train. He helped Magdalena and her baby into his place. The doors closed and the train rumbled west, the selfless old man shrinking in the distance until he had disappeared altogether. Five months later, during the first weeks of 1945, the Soviet Red Army stormed across the border. By spring everything was lost, as if an earthquake had shaken East Prussia into the Baltic Sea, never to be seen or heard from again.

He and his mother spent five years as refugees in Germany, and then they sailed for Canada, where Magdalena found a husband and a father for her son. His name was Max. He was a cook in the German army and one of a few thousands survivors (of two million German soldiers) at the Battle for Stalingrad. He stepped on a land mine on his march to a Soviet POW camp, where he waited out the end of the war. When he finally returned home, to a farm about ten miles from where my grandmother's family lived in Heydekrug, he discovered that his wife and young son had been killed.

"He saved our lives that day," my father would say of the old man. "Can you imagine?"

I could not. The only person I knew who had forfeited his life on behalf of others was Jesus, who my Sunday School teacher had said died for my sins. Even then I was beginning to have doubts about the veracity of such a tale: I couldn't figure out what sins I had committed that would require someone's death to absolve, especially a long-haired hippy in a dress. (Once, we had watched as a VW van spun out of control on the highway. My father stopped to help, and when the long-haired occupants appeared from the overturned vehicle, my father shook his head and warned me about the dangers of hippies, who looked a lot like Jesus.) What I did understand was the shocking revelation that Opa was not my father's real father after all, and that (at least theoretically) my father had a step-brother he'd never met and a step-mother who had been brutally murdered. Considering the safe and stable, if humdrum, existence we led in our suburban bungalow, this was exciting news indeed.

"What about your real father?" I asked, for at that point in my life I knew no one whose parents weren't biological. "Do you know him?"

"Opa *is* my real father," he said. "Just like I'm your real father. That's all you need to know."

But it wasn't. Answers begat questions, which themselves begat questions of their own. Now I wanted to know about the old man left behind, who I'd begun to feel more and more beholden to as a necessary precursor to my existence, and the Battle of Stalingrad, which sounded dramatic, and the mysterious man who'd had sex with my Oma and then disappeared, something I'd already learned was sinful—except in the case of God, who'd impregnated the Virgin Mary and left all the hard work to Joseph.

And so I'd begged Nicolas for his big black book, which I set down on the cold linoleum floor and gently thumbed its pages. Story after story and image after image depicted the horrors of the war, and each of them only enhanced the potency of my father's words: corpses and smoking tanks littered what had once been wheat fields, the crumbling remains of Stalingrad, which in just a few months had been made to look like the remnants of a 2000-year-old Roman city, and infinite streams of refugees inching for miles along snow-covered roads. That my Opa had survived and my Oma had kept alive my infant father though all of this seemed a miracle bestowed.

Then I turned the page and found a jumble of pallid, emaciated bodies in an open pit, while a group of soldiers casually smoked cigarettes, as if they were laborers on break at a factory. There was plenty of death in that book, but those images – how stick-thin their limbs, how moon-pale their skin. How cold the eyes of the living.

At first I assumed the soldiers were Russian. In our genesis story, the Russians were the bad guys. The Russians were the ones who had done all the killing and bombing and raping. They were the ones who had destroyed everything and cast my father's family from the garden. But as I examined the images it was obvious the smoking soldiers were German, which the captions indicted, along with the rest of the German people, with crimes against humanity.

It would be convenient if I could claim, here, that my 12-year-old mind understood the magnitude of what I had just discovered—that the German people had started the war and committed unimaginable atrocities and, so doing, had invited their own destruction; and that my father's story was a self-serving fiction that transformed the kind-hearted narrator who hugged my mother and coached my baseball team into, if not a

liar, then at least a disingenuous coward. But no: That would come later. I can recount only that my stomach contorted into a fist and I slumped against the wall. It was as if I had uncovered a damnable secret that my father and his parents had kept from me, and which I now had to keep hidden from the rest of the world. I returned the book to Nicolai and never looked at it again, but it had already cast me under its spell.



## A DAY IN THE LIFE OF NOWHERE

On a warm October morning in 1993, I hurried past homeless beggars and black market money changers and dashed up the wide stone steps of Budapest's Keleti Station. Inside, the weak, morning light struggled to penetrate the grimy windows in the station's arched roof. I was running late, and my head ached from the inordinate amount of Hungarian *palinka* I had consumed the night before. When I turned to peer up at the huge round clock that marks time here, a needle stabbed me behind my left ear.

I dashed from platform to platform until I found my train to Berlin, but as I tried to step aboard a pleasant, blue-suited conductor put his hand out and asked me for my ticket. I was getting too old for the crowded compartments of second class, stuffed from wall to wall with unbathed adventurers exploring Europe on the cheap, so for the first time in my life I had purchased a first-class Eurail pass. But my hiking boots, fleece pants, and ratty backpack still insinuated that I didn't belong here, and the conductor wanted to make sure I had the correct paperwork.

It felt good to rest in the big leather seat as the train tracked through the Pillis Hills and along the glistening Danube. Outside the window, maples and oaks shed their dying leaves in the brisk autumn wind. The trees, I knew, were part of a boreal forest that stretched north all the way to the Baltic Sea, where my father had been born 50 years earlier. I was looking forward to my journey, which would take me through a landscape I had never seen: across the border into the recently independent Czech Republic, through the medieval architecture of Prague that had inspired Kafka's tortured ruminations, and then up and over the Ore Mountains, along the Spree River and down into the heart of

Berlin, where I hoped to learn more about the lives of my paternal relatives in Eastern Europe before the war.

I took the opportunity to reread my ragged, dog-eared copy of *Of Human Bondage*, which foreshadowed, in some odd way, what was to come. Philip Carey also had travelled to Germany in Somerset Maugham's classic, which remains one of my favorite coming-of-age novels. Phillip, the club-footed protagonist, had eschewed the wishes of the strict and overbearing uncle who had raised him and fled to the Continent. After studying business in Munich, Philip abandoned any hope of a "respectable" career and moved to Paris to become a professional painter. Limited success as an artist and a couple of ruinous relationships with women shattered his romantic ideals of art and beauty and love, and his life in gay Paris was plagued by poverty and hunger and disillusionment.

"He did not know how wide a country, arid and precipitous, must be crossed before the traveller through life comes to an acceptance of reality," reflects Maugham's narrator while Carey is still bungling his way through Germany. "The young know they are wretched for they are full of the truthless ideals which have been instilled into them, and each time they come in contact with the real, they are bruised and wounded.... They must discover for themselves that all they have read and all they have been told are lies, lies, lies; and each discovery is another nail driven into the body on the cross of life."

As the naive protagonist of my own story, I could relate to Phillip's misguided search for meaning. All I knew of Hungary when I arrived two months earlier was what I had glimpsed on CNN in 1989. The Hungarian government had been the first to breach the Iron Curtain when it dismantled its 150-mile border fence with Austria. I remember

lounging on the sofa while thousands of Hungarians and Czechoslovakians and East Germans abandoned their two-stroke Trabants to walk through the forest toward the West and a future that had seemed, just a few months earlier, an impossible dream.

Despite the historical gravity of the moment, I couldn't have cared less. To please my father I had decided to study business in university, but the idea of donning a suite every morning to count beans and help corporations squeeze every last penny of profit from their overworked employees was sounding more and more unethical, not to mention boring, every day. When Doug and Blaine showed up at Easter in 1989, they convinced me that I should join them in Kelowna, so I traded the drudgery of Accounting and Management of Human Resources for a more entertaining job as a bouncer in a raucous nightclub. After a month of boozing and broads and a back-alley brawl that nearly cost me my life, I realized the excitement I craved was simply a sybaritic escape from my dull, middle-class existence.

While hordes of Eastern Europeans swept away the Iron Curtain that had imprisoned them for so long, I returned home to yet more drudgery, this time in a law firm's mailroom. It was tedious, but it required little effort and no student loans, and it paid well besides. I stashed some money away and, like Phillip Carey, ignored my father's advice and took my illusions of the good life on a Grand Tour of Europe. I flew to Amsterdam and endured a crowded, two-day train ride to Italy, where my girlfriend was waiting for me after sunning herself on Greek beaches. I couldn't wait to run my hands over her sun-tanned skin, but when I arrived in Brindisi she told me she had been unfaithful. It was the first time I had felt the sting of betrayal, and, like Philip, I began to learn that love could be as much prison as palace. But I loved her, or thought I did, and

there was little else to do but see the sights and allow her to make amends. Rather than explore the recently unfettered treasures of Central and Eastern Europe, we indulged in the bacchanalian pleasures of the standard backpack-by-train tour across the playground of Western Europe. We guzzled lager at the Hofbrauhaus in Munich. Experimented with acid in Barcelona. Fucked ourselves silly on warm Algarvian sand.

So intent was I on wringing every last bit of pleasure from a *san souci* blitzkrieg across Europe that I rarely set foot in a museum or art gallery. Worse, I never bothered with the duty of visiting my cousins in Berlin, who had fled along with my father from East Prussia at the end of the Second World War. Now that I had finished university and developed an interest in the narrative of history—now that I was, in fact, living on the far side of what was once the Iron Curtain—it was time to make amends for my self-indulgence and spend some time with my relatives in the Fatherland.

The door opened and a border guard strode toward me like a soldier on parade. My head throbbed as I handed him my Canadian passport. While he flipped through its mostly blank pages I perused the intricate text of his uniform.

Tall boots the color of jet.

The metallic glimmer of a handgun.

A flat-topped cap with black bill.

"Beeg problemom," he growled, and gestured me to follow him up-train.

I didn't understand what was going on, and I had heard enough unpleasant stories about Eastern European border guards who hadn't quite learned the basic tenets of democratic rights and freedoms that I felt the hand of fear grip the back of my neck. Expats I knew I had been detained in unsavory conditions for days.

I turned to the man behind me, the only other person in the car, and asked him if he needed a visa to cross into the Czech Republic.

“No,” he replied, “I don’t. But I’m an American and I’m going to Bratislava.”

“*Schnell,*” the guard barked in German, searching for a language we could both understand. “*Jetzt.*”

I knew enough German to know that he meant for me to come now, and quickly, so I lifted my pack from the overhead rack and slouched after my antagonist. I soon found myself in second class, though this time the only occupants appeared to be a half-dozen border guards leaning casually against the hallway walls. I glanced into a dim compartment and saw a sallow, long-haired young man sitting alone. A few steps later I was shoved into an empty compartment of my own. But for the steady thrum of the train, all was quiet. I couldn’t help but think of poor Rubashov in Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*. There must, I thought, be a mistake in the system.

**The train slowed to a stop** in what appeared to be the very middle of nowhere. The view from the window in my makeshift cell seemed to indicate our short train ride had taken us back in time. I could see a dilapidated little train station that looked as if it hadn’t seen a paintbrush since the Soviets arrived in 1948, a faded sign (presumably in Czech) announcing the name of this anonymous place. Three run-down trucks and the rusting hulks of train cars slept nearby, wagons so old and neglected they might be relics of the Second World War.

A guard opened the door and I stepped into the hallway to find I wasn’t the only traveller whose journey had been interrupted. I recognized the sallow young man with the

long dark hair, but there was also an elderly woman in a pale-blue sweater vest and a rather prim-looking young man wearing tan chinos and a navy cardigan. The guards herded us down the stairs and across the tracks, and into an unfinished building of grey cinder-block. The air was thick and musty. We climbed the narrow stairs to an unkempt hallway, where chairs dangled upside-down from desktops and a pile of primitive welding equipment lay in the corner. The guards motioned us to sit in a row of hard wooden chairs, our backs to the wall, and then promptly disappeared behind the only door in sight.

For what seemed like an eternity I could hear the jumbled voices of the border guards yukking it up behind the door. *What the fuck is going on in there? Why are we just sitting here?* My apprehension was slowly turning to frustration. I had learned during my first two months in Budapest that although Communism had been abandoned, Communist-era bureaucracy had not. Anything that involves paperwork and permissions takes forever to manifest, and the magnitude of unforeseen delays makes getting a mortgage at home seem the very essence of clockwork.

Finally I turned to the grey-haired woman sitting on my left, who reminded me, perhaps hopefully, of Mrs. Polifax, Dorothy Gilman's geriatric sleuth who solves international crimes at the drop of a sun hat.

"Do you know why we're here?" I whispered.

"Oh yes, dear me," she said, rather loudly it seemed to me. "My son and I were on our way to Bratislava for the day, but it seems we left our passports in our hotel room."

"Quite silly, really," she added. "We're Americans, after all, and we ought to know better."

“I’m Nancy, and this is my son, Paul,” she went on. “He’s studying applied physics at Yale.”

Paul nodded politely and held out his hand for a formal shake. I obliged him, and then tried to quash the conversation by staring straight at the wall three feet ahead of me. My head still thundered and I was worried that any conversation might upset the guards behind the door, two of whom I had noticed were carrying large-caliber automatic weapons.

*Bratislava? That’s the second person I’ve met on this train heading to Bratislava. But that’s the capital of Slovakia....*

Awareness dawned slowly, as it so often does when traveling abroad. It was obvious I had made a mistake. I had confirmed before I left that I didn’t need a visa to travel to either Germany or the Czech Republic, but it seemed I hadn’t examined the map closely enough. A border I didn’t know I had to cross—one that didn’t even exist four years ago, when Czechoslovakians were making a beeline for Vienna on my television screen—had thrown itself inconveniently across my path. The train tracks, it seemed, clipped the southwest sliver of Slovakia before heading for Prague and, beyond that, Germany. On a map, it is a matter of less than an inch.

“They are talking about us,” whispered the sallow young man, who sat to my right. He looked about twenty, and his lamb-chop sideburns stood out against the pale ivory of his cheeks. He was tall and thin, and the sleeves of his diminutive denim jacket barely covered his elbows made him look a little like Frankenstein. It dawned on me that I had worn just such a jacket in high school, with "Sabbath Bloody Sabbath" slashed across the back in black marker.

Before I could respond, three men ascended the stairs in front of us carrying toolboxes and armfuls of metal pipe. They stood off to our right, smoking and chatting and eyeing us with idle curiosity. The shortest of the three, wearing a blue toque and overalls but no protective glasses, sparked the welding torch to life with his cigarette. They all bent down, working slowly and deliberately, bending and fitting pipe together like pieces in a long, silver puzzle. When they turned the stiletto flame on the joints, sparks showered around us like neon hail and the room stank of hot solder.

The door at the end of the hall swung open and a burly guard burst out of the office. He waved a fistful of pink papers over his head and made straight for the mysterious young man beside me, and he screamed at him over the steady hiss of the torch. As sparks arced behind the guard, he shoved the documents up into the young man's pale face, forcing him to turn away. Nancy and Paul and I just stared. The welders went on about their business as if nothing had happened. It felt like a scene straight out of *Clockwork Orange*.

**The young man beside me** leaned back in his chair and retrieved a pack of Marlboros from his jacket pocket. "My name is Stefan," he said, ushering a thick stream of blue-grey smoke from his lips. He seemed resigned to his fate, and his resignation relaxed me. We were stuck, and there was nothing to do but wait for the situation to resolve itself. I turned and introduced myself, and we both leaned forward with our elbows on our knees and dropped into easy conversation.



He asked about my taste in music, and I mumbled something about Led Zeppelin and classic rock. He confessed his undying love of Elvis, but I found it hard to believe someone his age would have grown up listening to Elvis in Communist Hungary.

“How’d you get access to Elvis in Hungary? I thought that kind of music would have been banned here then.”

“I’m not Hungarian,” he said. “I’m Bosnian.”

“Ahhh. Is that your big problem?”

“Yes. I’m a ... how do you call it in English? ... a refugee.”

And with that he told me the entire story. He said his mother was Croatian and his father a Serb, but he identified himself as a Bosnian, a citizen of the little country that at the time clung precariously to a small mountainous space between Serbia and Croatia, on the Balkan Peninsula south of Hungary. He had lived in Sarajevo, which before the war had been a modern, sophisticated city characterized by tolerance and harmony. That the war would start in such a place was tragically ironic. He said Bosnian Serbs began the siege of Sarajevo on April 5, 1992, in what was the first step in an orderly, brutal and well-conceived plan to partition the city (and eventually the entire country) into ethnically pure regions. The first official casualty, a Croatian Muslim medical student studying in Bosnia's capital, was hit by a Bosnian Serb bullet while she participated in a rally protesting the division of a city that had for so long stood for tolerance and unity. When she died on her way to the hospital, so too did Bosnia's enlightened sense of itself, savagely torn apart by nationalist barbarians.

"Fucking murderers," he said. "They shot my father, too."

After his father's death, he had fled north into his mother's native Croatia, but the refugee camps were overcrowded and dangerous. He sneaked across the border to Hungary and arrived in Budapest just a few months before I did. The Czech government granted him refugee status, and the Czech Embassy in Budapest had issued him documents (the pink papers the guard had shoved in his face) that would allow him to cross the Czech border. Like me, he had caught the early morning train to Prague, where family and friends, perhaps even a job, awaited him. But because he didn't have a passport, the Slovak border guards would not allow him to proceed to Prague.

"Well where's your passport?" I was intrigued by his story, but I wanted to make sure he wasn't bullshitting me.

"My Yugoslavian passport was stolen," he said, "and I can't get a new one. That's why I'm sitting here with you, in the middle of fucking nowhere."

He said the Yugoslavian Embassy in Budapest (which now was really Serbian) refused to issue him a new passport because they didn't consider him a Serb. Neither would officials at the newly established Croatian Embassy give him a Croatian passport, and there was no way for him to get a Bosnian passport in Budapest, even though Bosnia-Herzegovina had been recognized as an independent state. This left Stefan with no passport and no way out, a displaced person trapped in the invisible space that exists between Central and Eastern Europe's shifting—always shifting—political borders.

All of a sudden my predicament seemed laughably insignificant. For me the whims of historical circumstance were simply an inconvenience, but for Stefan the consequences were infinitely more severe. I was sure to be enjoying a coffee in the kitchen of my cousin's Berlin apartment by noon the next day. If and when we were

released by our Slovakian captors, I would simply head back to Budapest and catch the next train to the Austrian capital of Vienna. From there Berlin was only a twelve-hour, visa-free train ride away. While I was free to come and go as I pleased, Stefan was trapped in a Kafkaesque story from which there seemed no escape.

**At five minutes to three**, two guards herded us down the stairs and onto the empty platform. A decrepit train hissed and squealed as it ground to a halt. The guards opened a door and ushered us into the empty car, where the four of us sat quietly as the train lurched into motion. The more I thought about Stefan's story, the more I wanted to help him. I told him about my plan to catch the next train to Vienna and then on to Prague and Berlin.

"Why don't you join me? I'd be happy to buy your ticket."

He thanked me but said, no, that wouldn't work. He had tried, but the Austrians already had turned him back at the border for the same reasons the Slovaks had.

"Why don't you fly to Prague?" I suggested. "Then you wouldn't have any problems crossing the border."

Stefan looked down at his hands, now crossed in his lap. "I haven't got money," he replied.

"Where will you go? What will you do when we get back to Budapest?" I asked, turning to look into his face. The scenery outside had changed from hills and trees into Budapest's suburban blandness. Our train ride would soon be over.

"I, I don't know," he hesitated, shifting uneasily in his seat.

We sat in a cloud of awkward silence. The forested hills of northern Hungary blurred passed outside the window, now a stream-of-consciousness landscape I barely recognized. I thought about my father and how he had come to Canada. Like Stefan, he spent his early life on the run from the consequences of racist nationalism. He was born on April 26, 1944, to a pious family of German Lutherans on the very eastern edge of East Prussia. The Wehrmacht was digging in as the Soviet Red Army advanced, and in September the Allies bombed Königsberg into rubble just 50 miles from where he had his mother, Magdalena, lived in Heydekrug (now Silute, Lithuania). Every night she could hear Russian field guns grunting in the distance. Rumors had been spreading for weeks that Russian soldiers were raping and killing every German they came upon, just as the Germans had done to the Russians on their failed march to Moscow. Magdalena knew she had to stay at least one step ahead of the fighting, so she packed a few things into a bag and carried her son to the train station to catch the last train to Berlin. When she arrived at the platform she found it crowded with hundreds of other people trying to get out. She pushed her way toward the train, only to discover it was already full. They would have to stay and hope the Russians showed them mercy. And then a miracle: An old man stepped off the train and helped her into his place. A moment later the doors slammed shut and the train began to inch its way to the relative safety of Berlin. They lived as refugees on a farm in southern Germany, and when my father was five years old they emigrated to Canada, never to return.

As our train rolled into Keleti station, I thought about how I could help Stefan. My father's future had depended on the unsolicited kindness of a stranger. If that old man had not traded places with Magdalena, who held my infant father in her arms, he would

surely have died during the last bloody spasms of the war, at which point the possibility of me would have died along with him. I couldn't trade places with Stefan, but surely there was some way I could help him get to Prague.

As I thought it over, Nancy walked up and pressed a green, one-thousand-forint note (worth about ten dollars) into Stefan's hand.

"Good luck," she whispered. Then she and her son walked off the train and disappeared into the crowds that now filled the station.

**Two types of people** occupy the waiting rooms of European train stations, those on their way out and those with nowhere else to go. Some sat stiffly in the yellow and black chairs, their bags and boxes gathered closely around them. Others stretched out on the cold plastic seats and passed time in a restless, drunken slumber. Stefan and I plopped down in two empty chairs facing the middle of the room.

"How about some lunch?" I suggested. I had decided to wait until I was about to board the train before giving him some money, and so reduce the discomfort that often accompanies spontaneous acts of generosity. Besides, I thought, it's been a long day already, and a decent meal would do us both a world of good. I dug out the food I had packed for the trip—ham sandwiches; the apples that were so good at this time of year; and a dozen or so home-made chocolate-chip cookies—and laid it out on the bench between us.

"Help yourself," I offered and handed him a sandwich.

While we ate, Stefan glanced around the room at the men and women loitering around us. Two men, taller than Stefan but wearing the same pale, emaciated look,

sauntered toward us, keeping a steady eye on our food. One of them wore a red sweater, the sleeves frayed at the cuffs, his jeans long since blackened by dirt. The other wore ragged green pants and black shoes, the leather peeled back at the toe. Neither one wore a jacket, though the cool air of late afternoon foretold evening's arrival.

Stefan looked up from his sandwich and nodded hello. They sat down, the one in red on my left, the other on Stefan's right. The three of them spoke in Serbo-Croatian while I shuffled my backpack close under my seat, scanning the room for a police officer or soldier. I was alone in a place that was coming alive with Stefan's street friends, and I began to feel a little uneasy.

Stefan introduced us, though I have long since forgotten their names. They were both from Macedonia, the southern-most part of former Yugoslavia. Macedonia had, to a large degree, been spared the tragedy of war during its bid for independence, though it too suffered from severe economic hardship.

"Could I have apple?" said the man on my left, in broken English, pointing to the shiny red piece of fruit that peeked out of the brown paper bag. "I haven't eaten" he paused to think, "three days."

I handed him an apple and a sandwich and offered the same package to the other man. The conversation ended as everyone turned their attention to the food.

When he was done the man in red told me that he, too, was waiting for a visa, and that when he got it he would cross the Austrian border and head straight to Vienna, where a girlfriend and a substantial bank account awaited him. His voice was full of hope as he told his story, though I had my doubts it was true. "But they won't give fucking visa," he

said bitterly. "They told, 'No war in Macedonia! But it's bad in all Yugoslavia.'" He used the term "Yugoslavia" as if it still existed.

I looked at the people milling around me, then turned to glance at the giant clock. It was time for me to board the train to Vienna and then Berlin. I packed up my things and stood. "Well, my train leaves in five minutes," I said. "I've got to go."

I desperately wanted to give Stefan some money, but I couldn't, not with a dozen or so of the waiting room's homeless denizens staring at us. I wished I could help them all, but I was pretty sure the room would erupt in chaos if I pulled out a handful of German marks. I felt powerless and a little sad. Stefan and I had spent the better part of an interesting day together, sharing the anxiety of a botched border crossing, our personal stories, a bag lunch; we had become friends of a sort, and I felt as if I were abandoning him.

I turned to Stefan and saw in his face a look of quiet desperation.

"Why don't you walk me to my train?" I said.

He agreed, and on our way down the platform he joked that maybe we'd run into each other again on the narrow, cobblestone streets of Prague.

At the door to my train car, I unzipped the money pouch hidden beneath my shirt and dug out two, 100 Mark notes (about \$150 at the time). "Good luck, Stefan," I said as I pressed them into his hand. "It was really nice to meet you. This is for a plane ticket to Prague when you get your new passport. I hope you get there soon."

I felt uncomfortable, the words tumbling out of my mouth like small stones. What do you say to a man who has been forced by fate to live on the cold streets of Budapest while you cross borders that are closed to him?

“I’ll be fine,” he said with a grin. “I survived the war, didn’t I?”

We shook hands and I walked up the stairs. As the train inched away, I looked back to see Stefan walking down the long platform to nowhere. Damned if he didn’t have a little bounce in his step.



## **GHOSTS COME BACK FROM THE DEAD**

**My fortuitous encounter** with Ellie had proposed an idea: We, too, could go back to look for what was left of East Prussia. I now knew people in Lithuania, whose help I could solicit as translators and guides. It would be easy enough for my father to join me in Budapest, and then we could fly to Lithuania to search for whatever remained of the lives of the Gailuses and the Kleins. The more I thought about it, the more insistent the idea became. What a waste it would be not to take advantage of an opportunity to visit my father's birthplace and try to find something of the lost world my Oma had mourned. But when I proposed the idea to my father, he said no. His life was in Canada now, he said. There was nothing to see and no reason to go back.

In theory, my father was interested in history. He was an avid reader of *National Geographic* (which is why we had twenty years worth of the yellow magazines in our basement), and we had spent hours and hours watching the History Channel when I was a child, especially shows about the Second World War. But when it came to his personal relationship with post-war Europe, he wasn't the least bit curious. I could only speculate that he was afraid of what he might find if he looked too closely.

And so, for the next two years, I begged and cajoled him every chance I got, and for two years he refused even to consider it. It was too far, he said, too expensive. And they were too busy. He and my mother ran a bed and breakfast in the mountain resort town of Canmore, where they also looked after my increasingly frail Oma. There was no time for fanciful trips to a post-Soviet republic on the cold Baltic coast.

But Oma was now in her 90s, and she had begun acting strangely. She put sugar in any pot left simmering on the stove, and forgot who my mother was. When she began accusing the B&B guests of stealing underwear from her dresser, it was clear that keeping her at home was no longer an option. They found her a place at the long-term care unit of the local hospital, which functioned as Canmore's house of last resort for the terminally infirm and the irrevocably aged.

It was a difficult decision for my father. Most men have a special bond with the women who have brought them into the world, but my father's love for Oma was rooted deeper still. She was the one who had carried his infant self out of East Prussia during the last, horrible months of the Second World War, the one who had kept him alive in the refugee camps. She was the one who had refused to let doctors keep him in a polio ward when he had been mistakenly diagnosed at the age of six. She was the one who had extracted him from the rubble of Europe and conjured a life for him in Canada out of nothing.

After all that, sticking Oma in a ward full of old people who drooled on their chins and shouted obscenities in the hallway felt like a betrayal. But dementia had begun to inhabit her mind and my mother had given him an ultimatum – it's her or me, she'd said – so he really had no choice but to move her to the hospital.

All my life Oma had spoken of East Prussia with a profound sense of nostalgia. "So schön," she would croon, clapping her wrinkled hands together as if in prayer and nodding her head for emphasis. "So beautiful." She repeated the same stories over and over again—about taking the horse and wagon with her father to the market in Memel beneath the sheltering canopy of the linden trees; about the bright white church they

attended every Sunday, and the family picnics they enjoyed on the sandy beaches of the Curonian Spit. And then she would narrow her eyes to slits and point her long bony finger at me. “And zen zee Russians came,” she would spit. “And they destroyed everything!”

Now that Oma had people to look after her, I saw my chance. When I returned home for Christmas I told him I had found us a guide and interpreter in Lithuania. Her name was Vaida. Her English was excellent and she was studying tourism in school. For a modest fee she would love to help us sift through the wreckage of post-Soviet Lithuania for whatever was left of Memelland and the Klein and Gailus families.

“It’s your last chance,” I told him. “Why don’t you want to see the place that made you who you are? Wouldn’t it be nice to bring back some photos to show Oma before she loses her mind completely?”

Still, he refused.

A month later, he called me in Budapest. He had talked it over with my mother. They would come in late March. They would fly to Berlin to visit his cousins, and then drive to Bavaria, to see if he could find the farm where he and his mother had lived as refugees after the war. Then on to Budapest before we flew to Lithuania. “If nothing else,” he said, “it would be nice to come for a visit while you’re still living in Europe.”

A week later he called me back. He was having second thoughts. He had told his aged uncles and aunts, who also had fled during the Second World War and made a new life in Canada, that he was going back to East Prussia. They couldn’t understand why in God’s name he would go back to a place that no longer existed. “Es ist dummm,” one of

them had said with the gruff disdain only the German language can adequately express.

“Es ist nichts mehr übrig,” said another. *There is nothing left to see.*

“Forget about them,” I said. “They don’t know what they’re talking about.”

**I had contemplated joining my parents** in Germany for the first part of their trip, but the thought of spending an extra whirlwind week in a small car with them seemed too much. We would be together for the better part of two weeks in Hungary and Lithuania. Surely that would be enough? But once my parents arrived in Hungary and told us what they had learned, I regretted my decision.

In Berlin, they had stayed with his cousin Ingrid and her husband Wolfgang, and they spent much of their time with “the crazy sisters,” Linda and Sabine. Ingrid and Linda and Sabine were all children of my Oma’s siblings. Ingrid had been 12 years old when they had left East Prussia, and she had babysat Linda, Sabine and my father during the war years. They had all fled to Germany, too, but their parents had never thought about abandoning the Fatherland as my Oma had.

It was common knowledge that his mother had been an unwed 40-year-old when he had been conceived, but he had always assumed that he had been born in Heydekrug, where her family had lived. Not so, Ingrid told him. You were born in Ortelsburg, she said, in what is now northeast Poland. Oma had been banished there until she had given birth to her fatherless son. As if that weren’t enough, Linda and Sabine told him who his biological father was: an Austrian man named Reissinger, who had been staying in my Oma’s pension during the war. As far as they knew, he was still alive and living in Vienna.

It makes perfect sense, of course, that an unwed woman from a devout evangelical Lutheran family living on the eastern frontier of 1944 Germany would be sent away to have her illegitimate child. What puzzled me was why my father's relatives, who traded Christmas cards with him every year and came to Canada for the occasional visit, would withhold this kind of information. I had asked Linda and Sabine many times if they knew the name of my father's biological father – my biological grandfather – and they had denied knowing anything. I was fuming.

As my father told me all of this over his favorite meal, a smoked pig's knuckle and a heaping plate of sauerkraut, in a Hungarian restaurant less than a two-hour drive from downtown Vienna, where Reissinger might well be navigating the Ringstrasse in his BMW at this very moment, it was clear that he couldn't care less. Heydekrug or Ortelsburg, Reissinger or Schlessinger, the past didn't matter. What mattered was his life in Canada, where his home and his children were. And the food on his plate in front of him.

"Don't you want to go and find him?" I asked as delicately as I could. "You know, just to look into his eyes and shake his hand?"

"No," he said, a strand of sauerkraut hanging from the corner of his mouth. "Why would I?"

**There was no mistaking** the legacy of Soviet occupation. Cows grazed beside the runway as our plane approached Kaunas International Airport, and a dozen Russian helicopters, half-hidden under tarps, sat on the tarmac. When we entered the shed-like

terminal, soldiers armed with automatic weapons waved the wand of a Geiger counter over our bodies.

I noticed a sign that said, “Gailus” and approached our translator. Her name was Vaida, a 20-something woman with long jet-black hair and lipstick the color of fire. After shaking my hand she turned and introduced us to the stout man beside her.

“This is Aenis,” she said in perfect English. “My godfather. He will be our driver.”

“Anus?” my father said, shaking his hand. “Anus?”

“A-e-nis,” he said slowly. “Three syllables. Not like ass.”

“Ah, Anus,” my father said. “Got it.”

Aenis smiled and grabbed my mother’s suitcase, leading us with jovial hospitality into the parking lot. On the plane my father and I had talked about what kind of car we might expect to find when we arrived. My father worried that because we were returning for the first time to an irredeemable land laid waste by the Soviet Union, we would be driving around in a tiny Russian junker with the horsepower of a moped. I was almost certain it would be something a little more upscale, a Skoda sedan, perhaps, or an aging Mercedes. Neither of us could have imagined that Aenis would set our luggage down before a grey Ford Econoline XLT with a plush burgundy interior. My father stared in disbelief. The van was almost identical to the one our family owned when I was a teenager—except nicer. “Where did you get this?” my father asked as he sank into one of four velour captain’s chairs.

My father saw the world largely in black-and-white. Things are either good or bad, the difference between the two usually determined largely by tradition and headlines

in mainstream newspapers. Science, capitalism and hard work – in short, the American Dream – were good. Stalinist Communism, on the other hand, which was the only other alternative, was bad. Such a *weltanschauung* made it hard for a former German refugee to accept the existence of luxurious American vehicles in a country that had been ruled by the Soviet Union for 50 years.

“My father bought it in Sweden two years ago,” said Aenis with a dramatic wave of his hand. “For tourists.”

I looked over at my father. He rubbed the arms of the captain’s chair and looked around, as if to make sure it wasn’t a dream.

“It is nice, yes?” Aenis said, not waiting for an answer. He pumped the accelerator and turned the key in the ignition.

Silence.

My father glanced over at Aenis, a furrow creasing his broad Germanic brow. “What’s the problem?”

“Sometimes it takes couple of tries,” Aenis said, gritting his teeth and racking the steering wheel back and forth before turning it over again. This time it roared to life, a sound as familiar to my ears as my own mother’s voice. When he put the van in gear the engine revved like a stock car but the wheels remained fast to the ground.

“Is this thing going to last for three more days?” my father asked above the roar of the engine.

KLUNK! The van lurched forward across the parking lot and threw us back into our seats.

“Yeah, sure,” Aenis said, lighting a cigarette. “It will be fine.” He rolled down the window and expelled blue-grey smoke in a single motion. “It just needs warm up.”

**We arrived in Klaipeda** a few hours after coaxing our temperamental van onto the highway. Aenis and Vaida dropped us off at our pension and drove off to stay with friends for the night. When we knocked on the door, the proprietor greeted us warmly despite the late hour.

“I am Antonis,” he said in German. “What brings you to Lithuania?”

Forgetting what he had learned a few days ago in Berlin, my father explained that he had been born nearby, in what was then Heydekrug, and that we had come back to find some evidence of his family’s existence.

“Ah, yes. It’s now Silute. But many Germans who fled from Memelland have begun to return to revisit the past now that Lithuania has regained its independence,” he said, endlessly churning his hands together like a mad scientist. “We call it *Heimweht tourismus*, homesickness tourism,” he said. “It is very profitable business.”

Unknown to us, the journey we had undertaken was part of a larger cultural phenomenon. Millions of ethnic Germans had been forced to leave their homelands in Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War. Most never returned, but thousands now travel back to revel in nostalgia while enjoying local culture and the tourist trappings of post-Soviet modernity.

Over a cup of tea Antonis told us that he too had tried to flee to the West right after the war, but he only made it as far as East Germany before being forced to turn back to what had become, during his absence, part of Lithuania. All the names had been



changed by then. Memel, a major center of East Prussian culture for a millennia before it was destroyed in the Second World War, had become Klaipeda. Heydekrug was now Silute. The Memel River was now the Nemunas. My father asked Antonis about Königsberg, the East Prussian capital about which his mother had told him stories. It is now Kaliningrad, he said, but he hadn't been there in years, because the Russians had refused to return it when the Soviet Union dissolved. There lies Pillau, he said, Russia's most strategic military port in the West. It houses 200,000 troops, six military airports, 4,000 tanks and 400 ships. "When all the ships leave the harbor," he said, measuring with his hands, "the water level drops an entire meter."

We said goodnight and climbed the stairs to our room, a thin barrier of transparent red plastic separating my bed from my parents'. Somewhere out there in the dark were the amber-strewn beaches and the lagoon and the long spit of sand my Oma had told me about, and beyond that, the cold, dark water of the Baltic Sea. What else we might find I had no idea, but I was beginning to have second thoughts. I had come to this forgotten corner of the Lost German East to discover what I could about my family's life before the war, to find at least a glimpse of the world my Oma had inhabited in her dreams since she fled with her infant son 53 years ago. But it was hard to decipher why my father had come, and after his display of apparent apathy in the Hungarian restaurant the night before, it seemed we had embarked on different journeys.

**The next morning** we came downstairs to find breakfast on the table. Invisible Anna had made blintzes, thin pancakes filled with jam and cheese. I raised my glass to take a long sip of orange juice, but before I could set it down, Antonis had grabbed a pitcher and

topped up my half-full glass. I thanked him in my best German – *Danke sehr* – and turned to the steaming blintzes. Antonis hovered over my shoulder like a yellow jacket, refusing to set down the orange juice pitcher, as if his life somehow depended on it. I raised my glass and took another sip. He filled the glass again, immediately, as if a half-empty glass were the greatest of sins. I took a sip of my coffee. Antonis set down the orange juice and ran through the swinging door into the kitchen to grab the coffee pot.

“What’s with this guy?” I whispered to my father.

“Relax,” he said, one of his favorite admonishments for his uptight, eldest son.

“He’s just being hospitable.”

“Yeah, but ....”

The door swung open and Antonis rushed in to add less than an ounce of coffee to my already brimming cup. Fearing that Antonis might collapse of a heart attack, I left my glass and coffee cup full and refocused my attention on the blintzes.

“Mmmm, just like Oma used to make,” my father said, taking a bite and turning his face to the ceiling, his eyes closed in gustatory bliss. “*Schmeckt gut.*”

Aenis and Vaida arrived as we finished breakfast. Armed with a battery of maps supplied to us by Antonis, and a sheaf of old, black-and-white photographs we had brought from home, we headed for Silute. The narrow, two-lane highway bisected a flat countryside of ramshackle farms and endless fields. This region was famous for its fertile soil and abundant crops, and it was this fecundity that had drawn hordes of German settlers in the late eighteenth century. The Kleins were butchers, the Gailuses milled grain, though my father always referred to them as middle-class *entrepreneurs*.

The scenery rekindled my father's memory, and he began to recount the stories Oma had told him when he was a little boy, stories I had heard dozens of times by now, for they were the only fragments he knew about where he had come from. According to family lore, Eduard Klein, her father, was the head of a large, prosperous family with four girls and two boys. They ran a butcher shop and meat-packing operation that had supplied the Kaiser's palace in Königsberg with cold cuts. Oma remembered helping her father make sausage as a young girl, and then taking it to market in Memel and Tilsit in a horse and cart. He died mysteriously the year the war started, and Oma worked at a pension. They worked hard six days a week and spent Sunday mornings at church. "Oma's fondest memory," he said as the landscape blurred by, a wash of drab grey and mint green, "was of riding her bike down this very same road, under the leafy canopy of the trees."

The image seemed preposterous. I cannot imagine my Oma—an overweight woman of 65 by the time I met her, who disdained sports and never, as far as I knew, spent a moment doing anything but working, cleaning, cooking or praying—on a bicycle. I suppose a lifetime that included two world wars and wholly disparate lives on two different continents has a way of changing a person, perhaps beyond all recognition. But a bicycle? Impossible.

As we drove, I lingered over the black-and-white images we had brought as clues. One shows my Oma and her cousins standing on the front step of a grey house in 1918. It is a close-up of three pretty, happy women dressed in their Sunday best, smiling as the sun warms their faces. She would have been 22 then, living in a different world. I turned to the window. The scenery did not resemble the idealized setting of my Oma's stories.

The sky was overcast and grey. It was early in the year, and the linden trees that lined the road were grey-barked and leafless. Fields stretched to the horizon in every direction, interrupted only by the odd copse of trees, hovering far off on the horizon like oases in a desert. Here and there a shabby old house. There were no cows or horses, no sheep or goats, only the odd chicken pecking God knows what by the roadside. No tractors plowed the ground, no people worked the land. Perhaps it would have looked better if we'd come during the summer, but in early April it seemed empty, as if we were the sole survivors of some virulent plague that had swept the countryside of its human occupants.

**It had been 52 years and nine months** to the day since my father had left what was then a prosperous little market town on the very eastern edge of East Prussia. It was spring in East Prussia, a blessed time of year, for the winters are long and bitterly cold along the Baltic Sea. Now warm days stretched on like rivers, and white storks circled in an irrepressibly blue sky that hung from horizon to horizon like a stretched sheet. Like much of East Prussia, Heydekrug had been spared the violence and destruction right up until the end. It was a clean and orderly place, with well-paved streets, white houses and red-tiled roofs.

My father had been born just ten weeks earlier, on April 26, 1944, perhaps one of the worst times and places ever to be born into the world. The Soviet Union had just launched Operation Bagration, the final, brutal invasion of Nazi Germany, which would sweep through East Prussia on its way to Berlin. In the process, more than a million Soviet and German soldiers would be killed or wounded and five million civilians would be forced to flee the raping and plundering that followed. But his mother wouldn't have

known any of this when she held him in her arms for the first time, a wrinkled, red-faced infant happy only for his mother's embrace and the rush of air into his virgin lungs.

Hans Graf Von Lehendorf, a surgeon who had been repairing injured soldiers and civilians for weeks, summed it all up with a flourish of German Romanticism: "Whoever had lived through those last months ... must have felt that never before had the light been so strong, the sky so high, the horizon so far away.... And that intangible element of the landscape, giving wings to the spirit, took shape with an intensity which only the hour of leave-taking can give."<sup>1</sup>

Within two weeks, everything would change. By early July the distant rumble of heavy artillery was unmistakable, and thousands of people and their horse-drawn carts filled the streets of Heydekrug as they fled westward before the advancing Red Army. On July 14, Luftwaffe soldiers marched thousands of American and British POWs the two miles from the Stalag Luft VI POW camp to the Heydekrug train station. Locals lined the road to watch; some threw stones at the emaciated prisoners, who discarded food and blankets that already had become a burden. At the train station they were loaded onto cattle cars and the trains began the long nightmare journey west.<sup>2</sup>

Although the Nazi administration was busily evacuating its extermination and POW camps across Poland, they hadn't bothered to begin evacuating East Prussian civilians. They had developed plans, of course, but they hadn't enacted them, in part because it would take time and resources away from slowing down the Soviet offensive. Instead, Erick Koch, the narcissistic governor of East Prussia, forbade the evacuation of civilians and made fleeing an offense punishable by death. Even though the Soviet guns could be heard in the distance, closer and closer every day, and the war was clearly lost,

admitting as much and preparing to flee was considered *Wehrkraftzersetzung*, the treasonous undermining of military morale.<sup>3</sup> What were a few hundred dead women and children, as long as the old men and young boys who were left would defend Germany's honor by fighting to the end.

And they did. Nazi propaganda continued to insist that Germany couldn't lose. It went without saying that Russians were inferior to Germans, who would soon unleash new "wonder weapons" and drive the dirty, backward Slavs back where they belonged. The speeches of Hitler and Goebbels were transcendent, radiating the invulnerability and superiority of Germanness. Even as the German lines weakened and the sounds from the front got closer and closer, many residents refused to leave their unblemished homes and blessed homeland. On July 22, the Red Army entered the Majdenek extermination camp on the outskirts of Lublin, where an estimated 100,000 Jews and other "undesirables" had been gassed and cremated in ovens. It was empty, but in their rush to evacuate the emaciated prisoners the Nazis hadn't the time to destroy the evidence of their inhumanity. The Soviets made much of their gruesome discovery. They convinced their troops that all Germans were beasts and that Soviet rage and revenge were just. Lev Kopelev, a well-known dissident writer who was a Soviet army officer during the invasion of East Prussia, ordered his men to get out of their jeeps and piss on German soil as soon as they had crossed the border.<sup>4</sup> Then they raped and killed their way to the Baltic Coast, just as the Germans had done on their failed march on Moscow.

I have no idea what impelled my Oma and her sisters to flee when so many decided to stay put. Perhaps it was the white storks, which would have been staging in and around Heydekrug to make their own more natural migration, south to the Middle

East and then on to Africa. Perhaps it was the capture of Kaunas 125 miles to the west the day before. Perhaps it was the terrible sound of the guns, ever nearer, ever louder, and the rumors of rape and torture that had reached fever pitch. Most likely it was her six-week-old son, who had only just begun to raise his eyebrows and coo when she sang him German lullabies.

Whatever it was, on August 2, 1944, she left the small, well-kept Klein house, which was still in perfect repair, and boarded a train for Berlin. Like many refugees who fled, she may have thought she'd be back in a month or two, to sweep the broken glass from the floor of her home and resume her German life in the land of her people, just as they'd done after all the other wars they'd survived.

This time was different. Three weeks later the British air force firebombed Königsberg, destroying the capital of East Prussia, a city that had survived previous invasions by the Russians and the Tatars, the Thirty Years War, and Napoleon. On October 9, when the Red Army overran Heydekrug, it forever ceased to be a German city. What we saw around us now was a shadow of what it once was, transformed by one of the most brutal battles in history, the bloody aftermath of the war, and fifty years of ruthless Stalinization.

**The van thudded** over a set of railroad tracks on the outskirts of town. Linda and Sabine, the crazy sisters from Berlin, had told my father that the old Klein property was on the right-hand side of the main highway as you drove into town, just past the spot where the train tracks cross the highway.

“We must be getting close,” my father said, straining forward in his seat.

“That might be it right there,” replied my mother, pointing.

“Yes, that’s it, 33,” said Vaida, her voice clipped and cool, as always.

“Can’t be,” said my father. “It’s brick.”

“The house is in behind,” I said, holding the photograph up to compare. “This is it.”

Aenis pulled the van over and it sputtered to a stop. He lit a cigarette while the rest of us got out and lingered by the side of the road. A mangy little dog walked up the unpaved driveway to greet us. The bare branches of apple and plum trees reached into a slate sky from just beyond the fence. The red-brick building was an L-shaped barn. It was empty, but white lace curtains and a black mailbox (33a) at the far end suggested that part of it at least had been turned into an apartment. There was an unplanted garden beside the house, and the derelict frame of a greenhouse, shreds of plastic sheet flapping in the icy wind.

Like the barn, the house was basically intact. Since the Kleins had lived here it had been divided into two apartments, and a small porch-like addition had been tacked on to the far end. The eavestrough hung from the roof like garlands of rope, and the lime green paint, which appeared grey in the 1918 photograph, had faded almost to grey, as if present reality were trying to imitate the past’s monochromatic representation.

I waited to see what my father would do. If I were alone, I would have walked up to the door and knocked on it myself, full of curiosity and enthusiasm. But I was as much a spectator as participant. I had never been here before, but whether he remembered it or not, my father had spent the first six months of his life here. This was his first home, and I waited to see how he wanted to negotiate with it.



He climbed the stairs and knocked on the front door. We waited in silence, the only sound the cold breath of the wind. When no one appeared my father said, "Let's go. There's nothing for us here." It was as if he had hoped all along to find no one who could tell us anything at all about his past.

As we turned to leave, the door opened and a little girl popped her head out to greet us. My father didn't know how to respond. So far we had been able to communicate with the people we met in either English or German. Now someone was addressing my father in Lithuanian, a language his parents had spoken at home when they wanted to keep secrets. He turned to Vaida and without uttering a word implored her to help.

Vaida asked if her mother was home. A few minutes later, a middle-aged woman, about the same age as my Oma would have been when she left here in 1944, came to the door. She was plump, with dark semi-circles under her eyes, her blonde hair a ruffled mess. We all crowded around the door like children on Halloween.

"Ask her if she remembers the Klein family," my father said, in English. "Tell her they used to live here."

I stood quietly at the bottom the stairs. Vaida translated what she had been told to say. The woman sighed and looked past us into the yard, then answered in her native tongue.

"She says she doesn't know anything," Vaida said, turning to my father. "She only just moved in a few years ago."

Without waiting for my father to respond, Vaida asked if anyone lived next door.

"An old Russian woman," Vaida told us, "but she is nearly deaf and usually drunk."

The two-stage conversation felt awkward and we just stood there, not sure what to do, three curious foreigners standing on a stranger's doorstep that had once been my Oma's.

The woman leaned on the doorframe and looked at us, waiting for us to leave. My father shuffled his feet and began his backward retreat down the steps. But instead of closing the door and retreating into the house, she walked over and rapped on the wooden door at the far end of the house, shouting the old woman's name. Eventually the door swung open to reveal an ancient-looking woman dressed from head to toe in black: scarf, sweater and skirt. She tottered where she stood, like an old tree in a storm.

The neighbor explained who we were and why we had come. At the word "Klein," the old woman raised her head and nodded. We all inched a few steps closer as she spoke, slowly, as if trying to recall the words.

She spoke in Russian, which meant the woman from next door had to translate to Vaida, who then told us that, yes, she remembered the Kleins. She said she was just a child when Russian soldiers had thrown Oma's mother, Lydia, out into the street and moved her family in. She said her family had felt sorry for her, and let her pick apples from the trees in the yard. She apologized, and said there was nothing they could have done.

"It's okay," my father said, in German. "It doesn't matter anymore."

"It was a long time ago," she said, this time in German.

I could see the disappointment in my father's face. My Oma had always obsessed about the way things appeared to the outside world, and my father was the same. There was no greater crime than to entertain visitors in a messy house, or misbehave (or worse,

allow your children to misbehave) in public. I could tell that the state of the Klein family's old house broke his heart. As we turned to leave I wondered whether we should have come after all.

**We drove up the street** in silence. From the backseat I watched my father's face for any sign of emotion, but he stared straight ahead as if we were driving to a funeral. I had thought it would be different, that he would have been happy simply to find the house no matter its condition. Instead the mood was solemn. I tried to imagine the Klein house not as we had just seen it, but as it once had been, shining in the summer sun, the trim perfectly white against the green slats, the door open to the breeze. The apple and plum trees sagging heavy with fruit, the scent of horses and hay, cows mooing from the barn. My Oma standing on the front porch with my swaddled father in her arms, her dark hair pulled back from her face as she leans forward to kiss him on the forehead. In two months she will be carrying him for days through the war-torn wreckage of Germany, but for now she is content to hold him as if he were the only thing that mattered.

Where would he be now if they had stayed, I wondered? Married? Children? Dead, I'd wager. One thing was sure: I would never have been born. If not for the pluck of those German soldiers, who had held the Soviets back just long enough; and Oma's decision to leave, and her courage along the way; and a great deal of luck, there would be no Fred and no "I" to remember anything.

"There it is," my mother said. "It looks just like it does in the picture."

I took the postcard from my mother's hand and held it to the window. It could have been taken yesterday: The church, topped with a red-tiled roof and spire adorned

with a small cross, gleams white in the sun. It is the only postcard we have, a black-and-white print of the Klein family church, sent to a friend in Berlin on June 24, 1943, a year and two days before my father was born. The German army had just been routed at the siege of Stalingrad, and Opa Max was on his way to a Soviet POW camp. The German offensive in the east would be all but over in a month, the beginning of the end of the Thousand Year Reich that had lasted little more than a decade.

The back of the postcard included an address in Berlin and a short, illegible message scrawled in thick, black ink. In the upper right-hand corner was a mauve six-pfenning stamp. It had been defaced, but the short, waxed hair and carefully clipped mustache were unmistakable: It was Hitler, his eyes and nose and mouth carefully scratched from this one, tiny piece of history. Who knows who did the scratching, or when, but someone had tried in frustration to exact retribution from a dead man whose twisted dreams of conquest literally had erased East Prussia from the map.

The front doors were locked tight, so my father and mother and I walked around back to the pale yellow rectory, hidden on the postcard by trees. We knocked on yet another door and the pastor reluctantly invited us in. He asked us to wait a moment while he finished up whatever he was doing. When he returned, he asked us, in German, how he could help us.

“I was born here,” my father said, once again simplifying the story. “This is the church my mother and her family would have attended, and it’s probably the church I was baptized in. Do you have any records of such things?”

My father’s introduction had piqued the old pastor’s interest. He was a small man, a hunchback who dragged his right leg behind him as he showed us to his office. A shock

of white hair peaked out from under a black wool cap that barely reached my father's chest.

"I'm afraid I don't think I'll be able to help you," he said. "The Russians destroyed most of the records."

"My Opa would have died before then," my father said. "Sometime in 1938? I'm not exactly sure. His name was Eduard Klein."

The pastor limped over to a shelf and pulled down an old leather tome sandwiched between newer books. He set it down on the desk in front of the window and began flipping through the pages, the sunlight warming his face and the yellowing pages of the book. He moved his thin finger slowly down the page, peering at the handwritten script.

"Here it is," he said.

I leaned over his shoulder and read the ledger. "Eduard Klein. Died November 23, 1938, of kidney failure. He was a butcher in Heydekrug, and he left behind a wife, two sons, and four daughters."

The old pastor turned in his chair, toward my father. "Would you like me to write up a death certificate?"

My father's lips trembled ever so slightly. He turned toward my mother and removed his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose to stifle his tears. My mother reached out and hugged him, and he fell into her as if he could no longer support himself.

I had rarely seen my father cry, and he always tried to hide it when he did. This time the tears came in a flood over which he had no control, a lifetime of repression giving way to proof of the life and death of the grandfather he never knew. It was as if he

were mourning the loss of everything the war had taken from him and his mother: the grandparents he never knew, the missing nieces and nephews and cousins, the place his mother had loved so dearly. My mother held him until the sobs subsided, and then he wiped the tears from his eyes. “Yes, thank you,” he said. “That would be nice.”

The pastor handed my father the death certificate and we moved toward the door, but my father turned back as if he had forgotten something. He reached into his pocket. He pulled out two one-hundred-Mark notes and handed them to the pastor. “Please, would you buy some flowers for Sunday’s service? And keep the rest for the church.”

He also showed the pastor the *Anna Karenina* photo and asked him if he recognized it. “This is my father’s house. We’re heading to Russ to find it. Apparently his family lived there.”

The pastor looked at the brick building, a dozen people clothed in furs against the cold winter. “It does look familiar,” he said. “But I don’t think you’ll find it in Russ. It looks like a place out by a church we’re renovating in Juknaiciai. Check with the pastor in Russ. He might be able to tell you more.”

The pastor closed the old book and placed it back on the shelf and we drove down the road to the old cemetery to look for Eduard’s grave. Unlike the new cemetery, which was immaculate, the garden of the dead in which Eduard lay looked like a scene from a horror movie. The woods were dark, the trees bare. The larger tombstones, some as tall as children, had been pushed over, and the concrete slabs that once protected the graves had been crowbarred out of place. We walked through last fall’s decomposing leaves to search for Eduard’s name, but vandals had stolen the nameplates from the grave markers.

When we found a fresh pile of human shit on one of the graves, my father turned on his heels and walked silently back to the van. It was, as the pastor had promised, a ruin.

**We were now** in unexplored territory. While the crazy sisters had made the trek from Germany to see what was left of the old country, no one from the Gailus line had ever returned. Except for us, Max Gailus had left behind no kith or kin. He was one of the lucky few Germans to survive the bloodbath that was Stalingrad, and then spent time doing hard labour in a Soviet POW camp. It's unclear whether he escaped or was released, but somehow he made it home, hoping to find a miracle: his wife, Anna, and their son alive.

They were not. Both had been killed during the Soviet invasion in 1945. We know nothing about the son, but the neighbors had told Max that Russian soldiers had raped his wife and nailed her to the door of the house. It seemed too awful to be true, but during my research I had encountered numerous accounts of this macabre crucifixion. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who was there, corroborated as much in "Prussian Nights," a long poem he wrote in a hard labor camp in northeastern Kazakhstan. In 12,000 lines of trochaic tetrameter he recalls the rapes and murders committed by Soviet troops on their way to Berlin, to revenge the atrocities committed by German soldiers on their way to Moscow. As far as I knew, we were the only members of the Gailus line left to care.

What my grandparents and father knew as Russ is now Rusne, a small collection of decaying wooden houses that reminded me of the Indian reservation through which I had driven between Calgary and Canmore, in Canada. The sky, the buildings, the roads, everything was brown or grey. There was no one on the streets, and the doors and

windows were shut tight, as if the residents were expecting a tornado. At the church, a young pastor greeted our knock at the door. He invited us in and told us the Russians had gutted the building when the Soviet Army arrived in 1945, but it had been reopened a few years ago. The roof looked like it had been replaced recently, and the brick walls had been patched and resealed, the result, he said, of a flood of donations from former expellees in Berlin.

My father introduced himself and explained who we were and why we were here. He handed him the *Anna Karenina* photo. The pastor looked at it carefully and flipped it over, saying “Sheerer” aloud to himself a couple of times. “No,” he said. “I’m not from here, and I’m not familiar with the old German names. I’m sorry I can’t help you.”

We thanked him and moved toward the door, which opened before I could reach for the knob. It was as if an old woodsman had just stumbled out of the Black Forest. He wore a black beret, suspenders over a wool sweater, and big rubber boots, and he filled the entire doorway. He was the caretaker, and looked like an older version of my father. What I imagined Eduard Klein must have looked like before he died 60 years ago.

The pastor explained our presence and handed him the photo. He shook his head, too. “This house isn’t in Rusne,” he bellowed. “I’ve lived here my entire life, and I’d know it if it was. Who are you looking for?”

My father explained that his mother’s family name was Klein, and we’d just found their house in Silute. The Gailuses ran a mill of some sort near here.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, of course. I was only a child then, but I remember their butcher shop.” He paused. “It’s not there anymore. They used to give us candy.”



He flipped over the picture and saw “Scheerer” scribbled on the back. He and the young pastor exchanged a few words, and the pastor pulled a book off the shelf behind him. It was *Das Buch vom Memel*, literally, *The Book of Memel*, the complete history of this region from the perspective of the Germans. They looked up *Scheerer* in the index. It wasn’t there, but there was a listing for *Scheer*.

“Ahhh,” the old man said. “Yes, yes. I remember now. It’s just north of here.”

He explained that it was a small village now called *Seriai*, just up the highway near Juknaiciai. We thanked him with a flourish of handshakes and piled into the van, and Aenis roared off down the road in a cloud of dust.

Twenty minutes later we were lost. We stopped by the roadside and clambered out of the van. Fields stretched around us like the sea, and the sky loomed bigger than I had ever seen it. There was no evidence of *Seriai* on the map.

We decided to pull over at the next sign of humanity, which turned out to be five children playing in the dirt yard of a big brick farmhouse. They stopped and gathered together to stare at the van full of strangers, and we stared back at them, not quite knowing what to do. Vaida got out and approached the dark-haired girl, who stood taller than the four boys. She nodded her head as Vaida spoke to her, and they soon went into the house, the other children falling in behind them and disappearing through the doorway. Aenis stepped outside to smoke a cigarette. Before he was done Vaida and the children rushed out of the house and the young girl climbed into the van with us. “This is Yolanda,” Vaida said. “Her grandmother said Sheer is just a kilometer away. She suggested we take Yolanda along as our guide.”

I was a little shocked at first. I didn't yet have a daughter of my own, but I couldn't imagine sending a young girl off with a van full of foreigners asking for directions. And yet as we pulled away and Yolanda began telling us about her life, it all seemed perfectly natural, the kind of fortuitous circumstance that sometimes brings strangers together for the most eccentric of adventures.

I dug into my bag and gave Yolanda a shiny red apple, which she clutched against her filthy coat as if it were gold. I asked Vaida to help me communicate with Yolanda and leaned over the seatback to ask her some questions. Yolanda told us her mother was divorced and that five families lived in that house. She said nothing about her father. Her favorite subject in school was music, because they got to sing together in a choir. She had a little brother, one of the smaller boys back at the house. His name, it turned out, was Max.

I showed her the Anna Karenina photo and her face darkened. "One of my schoolmates lives there," she said. "I don't like him much; he's mean."

**Seriai is as tiny a named place** as you'll ever see. To call it a village is an exaggeration; even "hamlet" is too generous a word. It is simply one big house and an old, windmill-less mill at the intersection of two dirt roads in the middle of endless fields. Although it was even more run down than Yolanda's house, the old Gailus homestead was instantly recognizable from the photograph. You could tell where the horse-drawn sleigh had stood, and there was the second-story window where the young couple had leaned out. It was even possible to imagine exactly where the photographer must have leaned into his

big, billowy camera before loosing the shutter. And there, there was the door where Anna had been crucified.

It must have been a grand place at one time, for it was indeed big enough to have been a train station. But time, or history, had been hard on it. The windowpanes were gone and the paint was gone and the plaster was gone, and the ground was littered with cast-off farm equipment, household appliances, scrap wood and steel, more chickens. A loud dog strained at the end of a strong chain, all teeth and spittle and seething violence.

We parked in the driveway. Two men, well into a midday drunk, slouched in old kitchen chairs at the near end of the house. We piled out of the van and a middle-aged woman walked quickly toward us. She recognized Yolanda, who said this was the mother of the not-so-nice little boy. When she found out who we were and what we wanted she said she couldn't help us, but she suggested we talk to the family that lived at the other end of the house. Before we could walk more than a dozen steps we noticed three women shuffling toward us across the junk-strewn yard. Two of them were middle-aged – they were everywhere, these middle-aged women, like nurses in a hospital – but it was the old woman in the middle who caught my eye. She wore a long, ragged coat, a dark scarf draped over her head and tied in a knot under her chin. This is what my Oma would have looked like had she stayed here, I thought. If she had survived the Russians.

All of a sudden the woman who had greeted us shouted in Lithuanian. Among the jumble of unintelligible syllables in the air above our heads I understood only two words: “Gailus” and “Canada”. The three women froze in their tracks, and the old woman quickly covered her face with her hands and began to wail, just like my Oma had wailed in her room at night when I was a child. The younger women tried to calm her, but she

could not be consoled. I couldn't figure out why she was so upset, and I worried that she thought we had come back to reclaim the Gailus property.

My father and I stood quietly by while she tried to gather herself. We both shuffled our weight from one foot to the other. The grey clouds had begun to clear. Aenis lit a cigarette and I followed the blue-grey smoke as it unfurled into the blue sky like unspun wool.

Vaida knew the game now, so when the sobbing subsided she told the women who we were and why we were here. The old woman looked straight into my father's face. "You are like ghosts, ghosts come back from the dead."

**Her name was Audra.** With Vaida's help, she told us that she had lived not far from here before the war, and had known the Gailus family well. She even had worked at the house from time to time. She said she was a teenager when her family had moved into the house in 1945, after the Red Army had arrived and the Germans had left. Like the old peasant woman at the Klein house, she apologized, though it wasn't clear what it was she could possibly be sorry for. My father told her that Max had immigrated to Canada, where he had married his mother and adopted him. He showed her the 60-year-old photograph of what was now her home, but it only made her more upset so he put it away.

She pointed toward a small copse of trees stranded in the middle of the field. "There is a cemetery out there," she said. "The Gailus cemetery." She told us a "legend" about Max's father, who was so rich, she said, that people wanted to dig up his grave to

look for the gold they were sure was buried there. But no one had had the courage to dig up a dead man, and the legend had died long ago.

“Go,” she said, waving her arm toward the trees. “I have tried to keep it nice. You should go there, to see.”

We walked across the field. It had turned into a beautiful afternoon, more fall than spring, the air crisp and the sky azure. The trees concealed a fence, which circumscribed a small, well-kept graveyard with five headstones. Two of them were weathered and illegible, sculptures gone back to rock. Presumably one of those was Max’s father’s. Two held unfamiliar names that meant nothing to us.

The fifth still gleamed marble: Albert Gailus, 1913-1938.

“Albert,” my father said. “That was Opa’s younger brother.”

Albert died before the war had even started, at the height of German power. I couldn’t help but think that although he was only 15, and may have lived to flee to Germany, and perhaps Canada, his premature death meant he had been spared the violence, displacement, and sorrow the survivors had endured. He went to his grave when Memelland was still whole. Still heaven. There were days, I’m sure, when my oma wished she could have been so lucky.

When we got back to the house I stood in front of the old front door, which had been sealed shut. It looked old enough to be the one, and I searched its pitted surface for nail holes large enough to hold up a human body. I wondered if Audra had seen Opa’s wife nailed to the door or the lifeless body of his son, and I thought about asking her if she knew what had happened. Against all the odds, we had found someone who was actually here when it happened, and I wanted to know if the awful story I had heard was

true. But I couldn't ask her. She had been generous and helpful, and I didn't want to upset her any more than we already had. And it didn't matter, not really. What was important was not how they had died but that they had lived, here, in this place, under an infinite sky that, when the wind was just right, bloomed azure in the spring.

**On the way back** to Yolanda's I gave her three more apples and a chocolate bar, all I had. As we got out of the van I took a 100-lita note out of my pocket and pressed it into her hand. Her eyes lit up like candles and she ran into the house to show her grandmother. Vaida thanked us. She guessed that 100 litas (about \$25) was about half their monthly income. I didn't feel particularly generous—it was less than the five of us had spent on supper the night before—but it was the least we could do.

Two middle-aged women had returned with Yolanda. They were curious and wanted to know who we were and why we had come. I asked if I could take a picture of the children. Yolanda's mother agreed, if I promised to send them a copy. Yolanda became excited and disappeared back through the front door. She returned a moment later in a clean jean jacket, obviously one of her prized possessions. She stood on the front step and organized the children around her. She picked up the smallest, a shy, young boy with a moon-shaped face. Yolanda beamed, but the boys stared sullenly into the camera. They looked like the faces of children I had seen so often on television, children who had grown up in the grip of war and poverty. Refugees, in a way, in their own country.

**That night, back at the pension**, we sat around the little table in the kitchenette and ate the staples I had grown up on: cold cuts, ham sausage, strong cheese, dark rye bread. We

recounted the events of the day, amazed at our discoveries and the good luck that had precipitated them. My mother and I talked about Yolanda and the crushing poverty she and her family endured, and I mentioned the historical roots of their plight—a country destroyed in the war, occupied by the Soviet Red Army, crushed under the yoke of Stalinist Communism.

“Can you believe how dirty those children were?” he said. “What are their parents thinking?”

I looked across the table at my mother and took a deep breath. The corners of her mouth dropped and our eyes met. She had witnessed the vicious arguments my father and I had had over the years and silently asked me not to respond. I did anyway.

“How can you say such a thing?” I replied, as evenly as I could. “They’re poor. They lived through the Soviet occupation, after a war the Germans started had destroyed everything. I’m guessing they’re doing about as well as they can under the circumstances.”

He took another bite of food and without raising his voice said, “If my mother and father could come to Canada and work hard and build a life for themselves out of nothing, then why can’t these people at least keep their children clean and their homes repaired?”

At the time I was incensed at my father’s insensitive remarks. They stank of the prejudicial way Germans have viewed Eastern Europeans for centuries, the Germans hard-working and virtuous people living a charmed life in a blessed land that the Poles and Lithuanians and Russians would have pissed away if it weren’t for their German masters. But I also recognize, now, that it was hard for him to see all that his mother had

loved in ruins. It's how most Germans felt when they go back, a stark reminder that they had bet everything on their foolish dreams, and they had lost.

**The next day we drove back** toward Rusne to find some living, breathing relatives. The old caretaker at the church in Rusne had mentioned that a family of Gailuses lived nearby, and my father was excited to find out whether they might be related to Opa Max. It seemed like a long shot to me. Except for a collection of idealized memories, all the members of the Gailus and Klein families in Toronto and Germany appeared to have written off the Old Country long before I was born. The last known relative to live here had been Lydia Klein, my Oma's mother and Eduard's wife. Lydia had refused to leave, and once the war ended and the wall had been erected between East and West, there was no way out. According to the story that has been passed down to me, she lived on the streets and in shelters in Silute for 13 years, working menial jobs and hiding what money she could save between the pages of her Bible. In 1958, when she had saved enough, she bought a train ticket to East Berlin. At the border, a young woman helped her cross into West Berlin – how is not known, or at least not remembered – and she walked to her granddaughter's house in Berlin. Linda, one of the crazy sisters and Lydia's granddaughter, remembers driving past a stooped old peasant woman shrouded in black as she left the house to go to the grocery store.

“Look,” she'd said to her cousin Ingrid, pointing to the strange old woman. “I'll bet that's what grandmother looks like in Heydekrug.”

When they returned from the store, the old woman was waiting on the front steps. It was Lydia.



It didn't take us long to find the Gailus place, a small, wooden farmhouse replete with chickens and dogs and a big blue tractor. (All the tractors were blue, Vaida said, because under the Communists, they were only made them in one color.) We knocked on the door. A lanky young man about my age answered. Yes, he said, the Gailus family lives here. But we would need to talk to his grandparents, he said, and they were not here. They were in Klaipeda for the monthly meeting of the German-Lithuanian cultural group, but he didn't know exactly where the meeting was being held.

Frustrated, we got back into the van and drove away. We were running out of time. In a few hours we would have to leave for Kaunas, where we would spend the night and catch an early flight in the morning. It looked like our search was over.

But my father was more animated than I'd seen him all trip, and he was not content to give up. Although we had already checked out of the pension, my father suggested we stop by Antonis's to see if he knew where the meeting was. Antonis was eager to help. He made a few phone calls, and while we waited for his contacts to call him back, he asked me if I ever thought about moving to Lithuania.

The thought had never even crossed my mind, and I told him as much.

It was possible, he said, to get our property back. If my father or one of his children came back to Lithuania and obtained citizenship here, we could apply to get our family's land back.

"How's that sound?" my father translated with a chuckle. "You could bring the Gailus family back to the Old Country."

It seemed about the worst idea I had ever heard, though I feigned interest for Antonis's sake. First of all, there wasn't much to "get back" except a couple of decrepit

houses and run-down outbuildings in the countryside of one of the poorest countries in Europe. Even if relocating could be made to sound appealing for some reason I couldn't think of at the moment, and I was able to negotiate what was sure to be a Kafka-esque labyrinth of post-Soviet bureaucracy, the return of the prodigal Gailus son would render homeless the people who already lived there, and I sure as hell didn't want that on my conscience.

The phone rang its brittle ring. After a brief conversation, Antonis turned and said, "I found it."

We arrived at the school in a state of excitement. It seemed incredible that 53 years after my infant father had fled his birthplace home with the Soviet Red Army hot on his heels, I might meet the relatives, however distant, of a man who had fought at Stalingrad, lost his family, and traveled thousands of miles to Canada, where he married a woman who had lived less than 10 miles from his Old Country home and adopted her son, my father, as his own.

We followed signs to a large gymnasium with a raised stage at one end. More than 200 people sat at long rows of tables set perpendicular to the stage. They had all brought picnic hampers full of food – dark bread, pickled herring, smoked ham, white cheese – which they shared generously with each other. Bottles of red and white wine, Coca-Cola and vodka decorated the tables. They looked at us, strangers in their midst, as we walked through the door and stood against the wall at the back of the room. It reminded me of the gymnasium at my own junior high school, except that a large, flag-like banner in black, gold and red – the national colors of Germany – hung behind the

stage where I was used to seeing the red and white of the Canadian flag. These were the ones who had stayed behind and learned to live in the world they had created.

A man approached and asked after us. Vaida spoke with him for a few moments and then he strode up to the microphone on the stage. In German, he introduced us. I understood “Canadieren” and “Gailus” and not much more. Two people, an older couple, stood and turned to look at us. She looked just like my Oma, the man an older version of my father, tall and broad. The Gailus grandparents.

I watched my father walk over and shake hands with the old man. He told for the umpteenth time the story of his family, who had lived near here and then fled war-torn Europe for Canada. The old man was certainly old enough to remember those days, but when my father was done the old man and his wife shook their heads slowly, as if in apology. They knew nothing, he said, but they were glad we had come.

We had found all we were going to find. It was time to go home.

## THE JEWISH QUESTION

Before I left Budapest for good, I returned to Berlin to visit Ingrid and Wolfgang one last time. I arrived on a Sunday, just in time for lunch. Ingrid was my father's first cousin, the daughter of Oma's sister Elfriede and her husband Helmut Masuch, who were married on February 2, 1940, at the Evangelical Church in Heydekrug. I wanted to talk to Helmut about the war, which is why he was sitting at the dining room table. I had met Helmut in Toronto once when I was a child, but now he looked as old and frail as a man can be: black suit jacket hanging loose over stooped shoulders, droopy face, hair as thin and white and wispy as a cirrus cloud.

Helmut, Ingrid, Wolfgang and I shared a lunch straight out of my childhood: Dark bread. Schinken. Tilsiter Kase, which my siblings and I called smelly-socks cheese when we were kids. (It's like a stinky Havarti.) Hot black coffee. The only thing different was the chocolate-hazelnut spread that European Germans seem to have adopted since the war. Helmut's staccato answers and my poor command of German made it difficult for us to have a conversation, but Ingrid was happy to translate. She wasn't interested in talking about the war; I had asked her before I came but she said no, she'd rather not; it was too painful. She was 12 when they left Heydekrug, and unlike my father she was old enough

to remember the things a child should never have to experience: rape, brutality, her sister's death on the long march to Berlin in the dead of winter.

Helmut had been an accountant at a bank when the war started and was forced to join the army in 1942 to fight the Russians on the Eastern Front. No, he didn't want to talk about the Front. It was awful, he said. *Schrecklich*. He looked down at his plate the whole time and mumbled, making it hard to hear. Then I asked him about Kristallnacht, the deportations, the concentration camps, which is really why I had come. The room went silent. Helmut mumbled something under his breath.

"He says they didn't know about them until after the war," said Ingrid. "They just didn't see anything that would make them think...."

BOOM! Wolfgang banged the palm of his hand flat on the table. "What do you mean you didn't know?!" Wolfgang is a big man, a prison warden, and his violent outburst frightened me. He got up from the table and grabbed from a shelf a shabby black book, which he slammed onto the table in front of Helmut. "It's all right here!" The book was *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's anti-Semitic blueprint for the future of Germany, which was published in 1925.

Helmut would not or could not respond. According to Ingrid, since the war he had been a successful businessman, a doting father, and a good husband, but now he looked haunted. He seemed to shrink back from Wolfgang and the black book he wielded like a sword, tired of accusations about a past that wouldn't stay where it belonged. I felt a pang of sympathy for him and didn't have the heart to push him any further. Lunch ended in awkward silence.

It's common for Germans of Helmut's generation to claim they didn't know about the violent and terrible persecution of the Jews, but it was hard for me to believe Helmut's alibi. Twenty years earlier, when I was 15, I'd heard my Oma make disparaging comments about Jews. It was only once, but it was pretty clear that she harbored more than a little ill will toward the main target of the Holocaust. And over the last two decades I'd studied enough mid-twentieth century history to know the terrifying scope and scale of the Holocaust, which was so integral to German society at the time. It seems impossible that everyone who claimed not to know didn't, in fact, know about the answer to the Jewish Question. I realized that what I have really been searching for is some evidence, some small shred of information that would vindicate her and the rest of my German relatives from complicity in the Holocaust. The very idea that they were complicit in such barbarism has been bothering me like a bad tooth my tongue can't quit worrying.

In the 30-odd years I've actively been researching the history of my father's birthplace, I've found nothing tangible about any Gailuses or Kleins being directly involved in brutality against their Jewish neighbors. But I wanted to be sure, one way or the other. It had become clear over the years that I could not trust their attenuated version of the story, and I wanted to be able to look Makaila in the eye and provide her with a full accounting of their existence before, during and after the war years.

My father and I hadn't found a single reference to the Holocaust during our visit to Heydekrug in 1997, simply because, I'm rather ashamed to admit, we hadn't even thought to look, and no one we talked to had mentioned it. I should have known better, but I'm sure my father couldn't even conceive of asking the question, never mind

wanting to know the answer. He and my mother had driven from Berlin to Budapest to meet me before we flew to Lithuania, and I'd suggested that they stop at the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial on his way. You have to drive right by it, I'd said, and it's a powerful, humbling place. And, you know, we are German. Instead, he'd stopped at the ostentatious Neuschwanstein Castle in Hohenschwangau, 80 miles away. Commissioned by King Ludwig II as an homage to Richard Wagner, he and my mother wanted to see it because it inspired Disneyland's Sleeping Beauty Castle. It is also one of the world's great symbols of greed and hubris, and its construction had bankrupted the king and cost him his life.

So, in 2016, I turned to whatever scholarly research and first-person accounts I could find on the Internet and in the university library. I was hampered by my inadequate command of German (and my total ignorance of Lithuanian and Polish and Hebrew), but since our visit to Heydekrug there had been something of a renaissance in Holocaust studies about the eastern territories, which had received short shrift over the intervening decades. This was in part because many aging Germans (both Jewish and non-Jewish) who survived the war decided to write about their experiences, both to fend off forgetfulness (by the former), and to illuminate for posterity the suffering they had endured (by the latter). Second- and third-generation Holocaust scholars, often the progeny of survivors, also have taken it upon themselves to poke into every dark corner of the Third Reich and tease out what happened and why.

In time I stumbled upon a book written by Solly Ganor, a Jew. *Light One Candle: A Survivor's Tale* recounts, in 350 pages of excruciating detail, Solly's journey from Heydekrug, where he was born, to his eventual immigration to Israel, where he fought in

the Israeli War of Independence in 1948. How I had missed it over the years I have no idea, but I was overjoyed about having another perspective, in English, on life in my oma's hometown.

In the mid-1930s, Heydekrug's population was just 5,236, the biggest urban center in a rural county dotted with even smaller villages. It had been founded on the cusp of a long, U-shaped bend in the Schiess River, which provided a safe harbor with access to the Baltic Sea. It boasted a rather large railway station, an even larger hospital, and a sawmill and a post office. There were also several banks, factories, churches and schools, including the School for Country Women. The synagogue was on the corner of Sudemann and Acker streets.

I was surprised to read not about conflict and violence but about coexistence. Born on May 28, 1928, Solly was the youngest of three children. His father, Chaim Genkind, was from Minsk, in Belarus, and his mother, Rebecca, traced her family origins in Lithuania as far back as 1756. They were as local to Heydekrug as the Kleins and the Gailuses. Solly spent the first five years of his life in Heydekrug, walking the same streets and breathing the same air as my oma and opa and their families. Just like my Oma, he remembered "a very clean place, with well-paved streets, white houses, and red tiled roofs." His native language was German, just like my father's. His most poignant memories were of "the gardens surrounding the houses. Roses and a variety of other flowers were planted in orderly rows, and all kinds of berry vines scrambled over white fences." Heydekrug, like all of Memelland, was populated mostly by Germans, which Solly recalled were "mostly friendly toward Jews."



This characterization is consistent with other Jewish accounts I uncovered.<sup>5</sup>

Germans, Jews and Lithuanians, it seems, had coexisted there since at least the fifteenth century. Indeed, the tumultuous period between World War One and 1933, when Memelland was a protectorate of the League of Nations and its future was uncertain, was something of a golden age. In 1920, after the Treaty of Versailles took Memelland away from Germany, the French governor abolished all restrictions related to citizenship for Jews, and no anti-Semitic measures were introduced. Jews who had been denied German citizenship applied in droves. The city of Memel became the cultural and economic powerhouse of western Lithuania, and people of all kinds—Germans, Lithuanians, Jews, even Russians to some degree—flooded into the region. The year Solly was born, 4,500 Jews lived in Memelland, most of them in the city itself. They were doctors and lawyers and merchants and skilled workers in wood and textile factories that were expanding production. Though only 10 percent of the city’s population, Jews owned 25 percent of the stores and 20 percent of industrial operations—lumber, flax, fertilizer, foodstuffs, tobacco and textiles.<sup>6</sup> Many Jews held prominent positions in important organizations like Memel Chamber of Commerce. Many were rich. Jewish children attended German schools, where they memorized the works of Goethe and Schiller, sang songs by Heinrich Heine. There were Catholic churches and Lutheran churches and synagogues. Sure, it was culturally and politically conservative, but so were most Jews. “A great portion of Jews identified with the Germans and their culture,” remembers Cherie Goren. It was one of few places in Eastern Europe where Lithuanians and Poles, Germans and Jews managed to share land and language in relative harmony.

Solly's best friend was Hansi Miller, a German kid his own age. When the two five-year-olds took turns playing on Solly's rocking horse, Hansi would pretend to be a Teutonic knight charging into battle against Lithuanian heathens, while Solly imagined himself to be Judah Maccabee charging the enemies of Israel. While my Oma helped her father sell cold-cuts and my Opa milled grain, Solly and Hansi fought playful battles without realizing they would be enemies one day.<sup>7</sup>

**Hitler was sworn** in as Chancellor of Germany on January 10, 1933, and almost overnight the mood in Heydekrug changed dramatically. Solly remembers that ethnic Germans "began to cool toward" the Jews. German children joined nationalist groups and a Jewish primary school was founded so Jewish children didn't have to mix with increasingly belligerent German gentiles. Jewish university students from Konigsberg University arrived unannounced in Memel, explaining to their Jewish relatives that they had been expelled. Men began to wear swastika armbands in public, and swastikas were daubed onto the windows of Jewish businesses and homes.<sup>8</sup> Zealous German nationalists began to threaten German gentiles who had befriended their Jewish neighbors. One night, Hansi's parents came over and asked the Genkinds not to visit them anymore. They were ashamed about it, but said it was becoming too dangerous, and they advised the Genkind family to leave town before things got worse.

Jews who had fought for Germany in World War One refused to believe their democratic rights were at risk, but others prepared to leave, to England or America if they could, or, at the very least, across the border into Lithuania.<sup>9</sup> In 1934, a year after Hitler took office, Solly's family decided to sell their soap factory and relocate to Kovno, where

his mother's family lived, 126 miles east of Heydekrug. When the Genkinds packed their belongings into a truck, Hansi ignored his parents' admonitions and rushed through the Genkind's front door, tears streaming down his face. "Don't go Solly, please don't go," he said, hugging his friend. "I won't let you go. Stay here with me." Before Hansi's parents dragged the tearful boy home, Solly gave him his wooden horse. The truck pulled away.

At this point, Magdalena Klein (not yet my father's mother) lived with her father, mother and sisters, on the west side of Memelstrasse, about five miles north of town, right where the railroad tracks cross the highway to Memel. Her brothers had left for Canada years before, fed up with the wars and the relentless authoritarianism. Thirty-seven years old and still unmarried, Magdalena worked downtown as a saleswoman.<sup>10</sup> She must have seen the armbands and the swastika graffiti, the horse-drawn carts streaming east toward Kovno.

Things only got worse after the Genkinds left. In 1937, the Memel city council passed a law restricting the practice of Jewish judges. Synagogue windows were routinely smashed, and roving bands of German youth attacked Jewish vacationers on the beach. Lithuanian students assaulted ten Jews at the Memel business school. In the fall of 1938, Germans prevented shoppers from entering Jewish stores. Supporters of the Socialist People's Community Party, Nazi in every way but name, formed the Memel German Security Service and marched through the streets. Erna Segalowitz, the Jewish wife of a Jewish flax dealer, wrote to her sister in New York City: "If only one could live a little more peacefully here. Particularly these days, one is in dreadful uncertainty. What will happen?"<sup>11</sup>

Parliamentary elections in Memelland were planned for December 8, 1938, and Lithuanians pleaded with the Jews to vote for Lithuanian candidates. Instead, the German nationalists won 87 percent of the ballots, with a voter turnout of 96.8 percent. Memelland had been delivered overwhelmingly into German hands. Nazi songs were sung in the streets, and “Heil Hitler” became an acceptable greeting in public places. Growing more confident by the day, Germans demanded to be freed from the yoke of Lithuania so they could join the Fuhrer.

Hitler was obviously listening, and on March 23, 1939, he made his move. Germany demanded that Memelland be returned to its rightful place as part of East Prussia and the expanding German Reich. The German army and navy were waiting at the border, and the United Kingdom, France and the Soviet Union looked the other way. Lithuania, which had unlawfully occupied Memelland in 1923, while it was a protectorate of the League of Nations, had no choice but to accede to Nazi Germany’s insatiable desires. Hitler arrived the next day, on board the navy cruiser *Deutschland*, to give a short speech in Memel.

You can watch the whole lurid spectacle for yourself in videos preserved on YouTube.<sup>12</sup> Hitler stands upright in the passenger seat of his black Mercedes-Benz Cabriolet Convertible, smugly waving to thousands of ethnic German men, women and children lining the streets in his honor. In a city of 50,000 inhabitants, 40,000 have come to honor Hitler as their savior by screaming his name and displaying the straight-arm Nazi salute. Some of them had burned down the synagogue four months earlier, on *Kristallnacht*, but on this day they had blanketed the city in Nazi flags and banners, each fluttering westward toward the Baltic Sea. As the horde waits for Hitler to step out onto

the theatre balcony, thousands of mouths scream like a giant colony of hungry seabirds.  
Then silence.

I greet you today in the name of the entire German Volk. I am happy to receive you into our Greater German Reich. I lead you back to your homeland which you have not forgotten and which has never forgotten you. In the name of the German Volk, I thank you for your brave, manly, and unshakeable insistence on your rights and your affiliation to the German Reich.

I believe I could not have expressed this gratitude in any better way than I just did by bestowing on your leader the one badge which adorns the chest of the new German Reich's best fighters. That you are able to celebrate this day is not the result of chance, but of immense work, the most difficult of struggles and sacrifices. You were once forsaken by a Germany which had succumbed to disgrace and shame. Now you have come home to a mighty new Germany.

It upholds once more its unshakeable sense of honor. It shall not entrust its destiny to foreigners; it stands ready and willing to master its own destiny, to fashion it, whether or not this suits an outside world.

Eighty million Germans today stand up for this one new Germany. You shall now partake in the surge of our national life, our work, our faith,

our hopes, and, should it become necessary, you shall partake in our sacrifices.

You appreciate this more than other Germans who enjoy the good fortune of living in our great Reich's heartland. You live on its borders and you will perceive what it means no longer to feel forsaken now that you know a mighty Reich, a great united nation, stands behind you. Just as you once suffered because of Germany's impotence and its fragmentation, other Germans did, too.

From despair and suffering now springs forth a new community. It is our will and our determination that it shall never again be shattered and that no power on earth shall ever break or bend it. Let this be our most solemn vow.

Twenty years of misery and suffering shall serve us as a lesson and as a warning in the future. We know what we have to expect of the rest of the world.

Yet we wish it no ill because of this. But the suffering it imparts to us must have an end.

Hence, I greet our German Volksgenossen of old as the newest of the

Greater German Reich's citizens. Let us join the other Germans throughout the Reich who, at this moment, express our love, our dedication, our willingness to sacrifice, our faith, our loyalty, and our confidence in the battle cry: our Volk and our German Reich. *Sieg Heil!*<sup>13</sup>

The crowd roars its adoration, a single din that annihilates all other sound.

I look for familiar faces. The film is grainy. Most of them look like my Oma and Opa as I remember them as a child, or from photographs in their younger days, before Hitler landed on their shores. There, right there, the man in the front row, his face full of audacity and rage—he could be my 35-year-old father if he weren't still five years shy of his birth.

Is it possible that none of the Gailuses or Kleins is among them? I'd like to believe this, but how can it be? All were families of conservative evangelical Lutherans, a religious affiliation ideologically predisposed to support Hitler and the Nazi Party. There is an 87 percent chance they voted for the National Socialists when the time came. It is impossible to believe that they weren't aware of the xenophobic violence their people had unleashed on their Jewish neighbors and fellow citizens. What, I wonder, had they done?

Hitler immediately issued the Law on the Reunification of Memelland with the German Reich. Use of the term Memelland was forbidden; they were now Hitler's Germans, citizens of the world's next great empire. Violence broke out all over the city and into the countryside. Rioters demolished three synagogues and smashed the windows

of Jewish homes, and Nazi storm troopers occupied Jewish properties.<sup>14</sup> The Aryanization of Jewish property had begun.

The majority of Memelland's 7000 Jews knew what was coming and had already fled into Lithuania, and most of those who hadn't now crammed trains to follow them. Thousands of residents showed up at the station to wish the "Jewish freeloaders, under whose influence [Memel] had suffered for decades," farewell. "We wish you a good trip and never-see-you-again!" the crowd chanted, according to an article in the local newspaper under the headline "Swastika Flags Over Memelland".

**Two years after** Hitler's speech in Memel, on June 22, 1941, the German army began its foolhardy invasion of the Soviet Union, which at the time included Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. After two years of suffering the Soviet occupation, which included mass deportations to Siberia of "enemies of the people," the Baltic countries grudgingly welcomed the arrival of their German liberators, a Faustian bargain if ever there was one.

The Nazis had opened Pandora's jar and the devil reigned with impunity. All over the country, Lithuanian Christians descended on their Jewish neighbors as German warplanes droned across the skies overhead. "One day I was an ordinary school boy from a well-to-do family," Solly Ganor remembers, "[and the] next day, a hunted animal.... After five hundred years of living together in peace, the thin veneer of civilized behavior disappeared."<sup>15</sup> Solly was 13 and living with his family in Kovno, where gangs of so-called "Lithuanian patriots" roamed the streets, assaulting and killing Jews as they went.<sup>16</sup> According to photographs and the eyewitness account of a German photographer, a mob of Lithuanian civilians armed with rifles and wearing armbands herd a few dozen



adult men into a gas station parking lot surrounded on three sides by walls. A fair-haired Lithuanian of about 25 rolls up his sleeves and drags one man after another into the middle of the enthusiastic crowd, where he caves in their heads with a long wooden pole as thick as his arm. After each murder, women and children applaud his performance. In less than an hour he had murdered the entire group, and when he was done, he stood on the mountain of corpses and played the Lithuanian national anthem on an accordion.<sup>17</sup>

Such brutality was common and much to the liking of the German officers who now controlled all aspects of life in East Prussia and Lithuania. According to the testimony of Colonel L. Von Bischoffshausen, a highly decorated officer in the Wehrmacht, his superiors expressed their dismay at the murderous rampage, but they “made it clear that such acts constituted spontaneous retribution against Jewish traitors and collaborators for their mistreatment of Lithuanians during Soviet rule,” and were therefore “an internal matter which the Lithuanians had to resolve on their own, without outside interference.” Ten thousand Jews were taken to the old fort in Kovno and shot during the first two months of German occupation.

Despite the danger, Solly roamed the streets of Kovno looking for bread. His family needed to eat, and food was hard to come by. While he stood in line at a bakery, a gang of Hitler’s Youth, dressed in their brown uniforms and red armbands, stopped to look for Jews. “Miller, you’re an expert at smelling out Jews,” the leader said, in German. “Let’s see how you do it.” The boy walked down the line, looking each person in the eye. He stopped in front of one boy with dark blonde hair and gray eyes. “He is a Jew, all right. Hold on to him until I finish the line.” While Miller continued vetting the line, the rest of the Hitler’s Youth attacked the Jew. When he fell to the ground, the leader

stomped on his head until he was still. Solly watched dark red blood pool around his head.

Miller stopped in front of Solly and smiled with satisfaction. He had found another Jew. "Hansi," Solly whispered. "How is my wooden horse doing?" They stared at each other for a long moment, and Miller raised his arm to strike him. Then he lowered his arm and continued on down the line.

"Surely this one is a Jew!" Why did you let him go?" said the leader.

"I know him. His father is Italian, that's why he looks so dark."

"*Schon gut, Hansi, schon gut.* We don't have to kill all the Jews, you know. We have to leave some for the Gestapo and the SS. I see that this one means something to you. Right?"

"No. I know the family. He is not Jewish. I told you he is Italian."

The leader looked Solly up and down and said, "*Come sta?*"

"*Grazie, bene,*" Solly said with a smile.

The gang departed and some Lithuanian women in line crossed themselves.

I can find no evidence of roving gangs of murderous thugs in Heydekrug, but sins abounded nonetheless. Shortly after the soldiers and tanks and fighter planes had passed through town, and some simulacrum of Memelland's quaint simplicity had returned, the SS constructed the biggest of a dozen or so slave labor camps in Heydekrug County for those Jews whose lives were spared because they were fit enough to work to death. Those Jews who labored in town were imprisoned in the courtyard of the mayor's office (later moved to the market hall). Like Jews all over the German Reich, they were required to

wear yellow stars on their clothing, and they maintained sports fields and cleaned streets and parks.<sup>18</sup>

The larger camp, for Jews working outside of town, was in barracks that once housed French POWs on Jahnstrasse, between Szisze Creek and the Raven's Wood, on the east side of Heydekrug not far from my Oma's house. I have seen it referred to as Camp Schillwen or Mackaia Camp, and it was a regional hub for Jews abducted from the smaller towns and villages in the countryside. One of those Jews was Gershon Young.<sup>19</sup> Born in 1922, he was from a Jewish shtetl called Keverdna, about halfway between my oma's house in Heydekrug and my opa's farm to the east. Like Solly, Gershon said that anti-Semitism was unheard of while he was growing up. He was 18 when the Germans showed up on June 29, 1941, Nazis dressed in their black SS uniforms. Gershon hid in the attic and watched the Germans carry the elderly to their trucks and drive away. A Lithuanian man told Gershon that if he didn't come down, his father would be shot. He did as he was told and they were both taken to Camp Schillwen. "We didn't figure they were going to kill people just like that. I was with all the people from my hometown. My friends were there. Their fathers were there."

Gershon worked for local farmers building dams. Sometimes the people he worked for would give him food, so he volunteered to work even on days off. A month later, the guards took Gershon's father and some of the other older men away, including the rabbi from Kevardna. The guards said they were taking the old men home, but later that day they brought back their clothes and Gershon knew that the "SS beasts" had killed his father. By the end of August, most Jews in Memelland and rural Lithuania were either dead or had been transported to extermination camps in Poland and Germany. On

December 1, 1941, just seven months after the Germans had arrived, SS-Standartenführer Karl Jäger, commander of the security police and Einsatzkommando 3, sent a memo to his superiors: “Today I can confirm that our objective, to solve the Jewish problem for Lithuania, has been achieved by EK 3. In Lithuania there are no more Jews, apart from Jewish workers and their families.”

My family’s ancient homeland was now, for the first time in 500 years, *Judenfrei*.

## THE LAST TROUT

We pulled into the grassy driveway beside the cabin and I stepped out to consider the water while my nephews stormed around me like wild dogs. Dark clouds hung above the surrounding peaks, but Walloper Lake gleamed in a few adamant streaks of summer sun, its surface a prism. The call of a loon beckoned across the water. It was a small, shallow lake, but I knew it held legions of small, feisty trout. After 10 hours on interstates and windy backwoods highways I couldn't wait to get out in the boat.

“Glad you made it safely. The weather looks like it's about to turn.”

I turned and shielded my eyes against the sun. My father stood high above me, leaning over the railing of the expansive deck.

“It's good to get out of that damn car,” I said. “How you feeling, Freddie?”

I hadn't seen him since Christmas, and I knew that his diabetes had taken its toll. He'd been in and out of the hospital, where surgeons had used a variety of tricks to increase blood flow to his besieged legs, which were becoming increasingly numb and painful.

“Fine, fine,” he said with his trademark optimism. “I should be golfing soon.”

“Will you be able to sit in the boat for an hour or two? The trout are waiting for us out there.”

“We'll see,” he said. “Come on up. I'll show you around.”

It was our third annual Gailus Family Summer Vacation. Now that small male children ruled our growing family, we had decided to gather every summer to spend

some quality time together. Alison and Erika each had two small boys of the same age (three and five), and Chris had adopted a baby boy a few months earlier. I had suggested these backwoods retreats because I was tired of spending our annual summer pilgrimage to Canada in Vancouver. Big City life made me anxious, and I drank more than I should when forced to sit in living rooms and make small talk. Makaila, now 12, lived in Washington, DC, and I didn't want her spending her summer vacations in houses and malls and restaurants in yet another urban metropolis. I wanted us to be outside, in the wind and the trees, hiking and swimming. And fishing.

**Over the next five days,** I spent every morning and evening in the boat prowling the Walloper shoreline in search of trout. It was slow at first, but as I learned the contours of the lake and the proclivities of the fish, furious little trout drew my line taut with increasing frequency. The trout seemed to hang low in the water off the steep-sloped shorelines, so I trolled the opposite shore and worried the deeper water off the point that formed the bay, where blue herons often hunted the water's edge. I often returned to the dock in the dark. One night I ran the battery down so low it would no longer turn the prop on the little trolling motor, and I had to row the entire length of the lake in the rain.

My fishing obsession didn't always sit well with my family members, who have little interest in sitting in a tiny boat for hours on end. My brother, Chris, suggested that the reason we had gathered together was to actually *spend time* together. I agreed, and pointed out that I spent every afternoon on the dock with Makaila and her cousins, as we all watched Alex and Sebastian and Kohlton and Braeden and Will run themselves

ragged on shore and dive and swim off the dock. And I always returned in time to sit around the fire and make Smores as little brown bats flitted through the air like ghosts.

But what they wanted from me was regular attendance at breakfasts and dinners as well, which would have made fishing in the mornings and evenings impossible. And then what the hell was the point of coming to the woods in the first place? It felt to me like an irreconcilable conflict of lifestyles. They prioritized order and tidiness and homogeneity, while I preferred the unruly wildness of nature. I worried the children didn't spend enough time interacting with the natural world, while my siblings prioritized timely naps and communal sedentariness, unless it involved a run or bike ride along a road. What I needed was to get away from all that shit. My preference would have been a wilderness campground a hundred miles from the nearest town. Walloper Lake was a compromise as it was, and fishing was non-negotiable.

Part of the problem was that my passion for fishing was a new phenomenon. I had only recently taken it up again after a thirty-year hiatus. I had remarried, to a wonderful Swede named Ylva. She is a soil ecologist who works on a large ranch-turned-conservation property near our home in Missoula. We try to harvest as much of our own food as we can, mostly by tending a large garden full of tomatoes and potatoes and carrots and something called Jerusalem artichokes, one of the many things I'd not encountered before meeting Ylva. She'd brought much abundance into my life, and my mother and father had grown to love her like a daughter.

One day she came home from work and said we should take up fishing. A number of her colleagues at work fished the Bitterroot River for trout and whitefish (and the

occasional pike), and then smoked the pale flesh into delectable table fare. She thought it would be a nice addition to the greens and veggies we raised in the garden.

Fishing? I said. Really?

I'd learned to fish from my father, and my fondest memories as a child were of fishing from boats and lakeshores on summer vacation. But I'd given it up about the time I finished high school, when making love and drinking whiskey and racing motorcycles all seemed a hell of a lot more fun than sitting in a boat with a man who seemed more and more like a stranger from another planet, a man with whom I shared neither interests nor ideas nor even, it seemed most of the time, a common language. I explained to Ylva that we'd never had much luck on rivers, and I'd grown up to think that fishing rivers was a lot like panning for gold. All we caught were colds or sunburns, depending on the season, and what the hell was the use of that.

She was adamant we take it up anyway, so I dutifully bought us each a spinning rod and reel. At the very least, I thought, it would be a fine way to spend sunny afternoons together along the banks of one of the most beautiful rivers in the world.

By the time we got out on the water it was October. The air was cool but it was a beautiful fall day, the yellow poplar leaves gleaming against a clear blue sky. The whitefish were schooling, and Ylva had arranged for the former ranch owner to teach us how to catch them. Bob took us down to one of his favorite fishing holes and showed us how to cast a drift rig baited with a special whitefish fly decorated with a maggot.

“Now, you just cast it upstream like this and let it drift down through the current,” he told Ylva, handing her the rod. “When you feel a tap, yank up hard to set the hook.”



An hour later, our creel was empty and our hands had started to numb in the cold. Ylva was frustrated and confused. She'd casted several dozen times and never once felt the hoped-for "tap". Her colleague, Jeff, had told her stories of catching 30, 40, 50 fish in a single afternoon, but we'd caught nothing but snags.

On the way I home, I tried to buoy her spirits. I recalled the lessons my father had taught me and explained that the essence of fishing was not *landing* fish, per se, but the experience and the setting. It was about the challenge, which was significant, and the desire to learn enough about fish behavior and technique to tip the odds in your favor.

She tried to reconcile this against gardening, which she loved. She put seeds in the soil and, with a bit of watering and weeding, she harvested in the fall what she had sowed in the spring. Although it was hard work, she knew with some certainty that she could expect to put several dozen pounds of vegetables up for the winter. It made no sense to her that we would spend an entire day on the river and not expect to bring home a single fish. We tried a few more times the following summer, when the sun was shining and the air warm, but she grew to hate it more with every cast.

The end came one beautiful summer evening. I had tested a new lure at a particular bend in the river the night before. I call it The Cigar. It's a four-inch, green and yellow plug shaped like a perfecto, with a silver propeller at each end. The clerk at the fishing store had told me to cast it out just after the sun set, to tempt a big old pike or brown trout to strike in the gloomy light. And so I did. Cast after cast after cast. It was supposed to imitate an injured duckling, and when retrieved it churned the water like a tiny motorboat. It looked laughable. I was just beginning to think the clerk had played a joke on me when the water erupted and there was a terrible crash. Whatever had hit it

almost yanked the rod out of my hands. For a moment it looked as if my rod was going to break in half—and then the line went limp and the rod straightened, as if nothing had ever happened. When I reeled in, the green paint was chipped and my line was tangled in the propellers, one of which had been bent to the side. It had been too dark to sort out the mess, but I'd touched up the paint and straightened the propeller and brought Ylva with me so *she* could catch whatever monster had ravaged my lure the night before.

We arrived around 6 p.m., which meant we had about three hours to cast spoons and spinners before launching The Cigar into the crepuscular light. Thirty minutes later Ylva caught a respectable pike, perhaps 32 inches long and as fat as a Yorkshire terrier. I removed the hook and bashed it on the head with a large rock to put it out of its misery.

“Can we go now?” she asked.

“What?”

“Can we go now? Home. We've got a fish.”

“But we just got here. I haven't even had a bite. I thought we'd agreed to fish until dusk. To, you know, try The Cigar.”

“I'm OK. I'm happy to go now.”

“No,” I said. “I mean, please.” I was begging now, and a little miffed. But I knew it would do no good to bring this up now.

“Sweetie. I just want you to experience the thrill I had last night. There's a monster in here. I want you to love fishing. This is it!”

“Fine.”

We fished until the sun sank behind the Bitterroot Range. With growing anticipation, I tied The Cigar on her line. She cast and cast and cast. Dusk turned to

darkness as The Cigar frothed the water's surface like a blender, again and again and again. Nothing. When we could hardly see the other side of the river Ylva handed me her rod and said she'd had enough.

“Now can we go?”

“Of course,” I said.

I turned on my headlamp and we picked our way through the woods as I tried to explain what had gone wrong. As far as I know, she has never touched a fishing rod since.

I, on the other hand, was obsessed. I bought more rods and reels and a shed full of lures and line and nets and weights and swivels and hooks. Much to her dismay, I spent more and more of my days prowling the riverbank, trying to figure out how to coax fish from the swift water. The lessons my father had taught me began to resurface, and I added to the long-stored memories an encyclopedia of data. I read books and searched the Web and interviewed friends who fished. It was a slow process but I began to master the craft. The first summer I hauled in more than a few giant pike, and the summer after that I attended to the art of catching big cutthroat and rainbow trout. And it had all started forty years ago, when my father had tied a lure onto my line for the first time.

Somewhere along the way I suggested to my brother that we take our father on one last fishing trip, perhaps for salmon on the British Columbia coast, before he got too old and infirm. Ever summer as kids our family had camped our way through the Pacific Northwest, and inevitably we spent some of our days fishing for salmon in the ocean. My brother and I both agreed it was a splendid idea, but the months and the seasons disappeared beneath busy schedules and the illusion that there would always be time.

Now my father's body was too decrepit for the rigors of a maritime adventure. Little Walloper Lake would have to do.

**On our last afternoon** I asked my father whether he was up for a spin in the boat.

Tomorrow morning we would pack up our belongings and leave for good. He was seated in a comfortable chair by the window, and I leaned over the back and hugged him around the shoulders. "It would be nice to spend some time together and catch up," I said. "It might be good for you."

He hesitated. Weighed the desire to spend some time alone with his oldest son against the pain and discomfort he'd feel in his afflicted legs. Getting in and out the boat would be a challenge for him now, and I knew that he hated to look weak and infirm.

"We'll see," he said, squeezing my hand in his. "Let's wait and see how I feel."

Later, as the sun began to dip toward the horizon, he rose from his chair. "The weather looks good and the lake is calm," he said. "Let's give it a shot."

I couldn't tell if he wanted to go or whether he was just doing it to make me happy, but maybe it didn't matter. Chris walked down with us to load the gear and situate my father in the boat. I wrestled the battery into place and hooked up the motor while Chris moved the fishing rods to the far gunnel. My father watched uncertainly and fumbled with the small clasps on his lifejacket. As children, my brother and I always sat in the bow and my father in the stern, where his imposing adult frame kept the small boat's attitude in check. But now we weighed about the same and it was my turn to pilot the boat and find the fish.

Still, getting him into the boat without sending us all into the drink would be no easy feat. He was a lanky six foot two and over 200 pounds, and his feet no longer communicated very well with his brain. I stood on the boat-bottom, unsteady as it bobbed on the water's surface. On the dock, Chris tried to guide him into the high-backed seat. For a moment it seemed an impossibility: my brother cradling one of my father's arms ... one of his numb, senseless feet on the dock, the other in midair ... the full weight of his body cantilevered out over the boat, the bottom too far to risk a leap.

"I'm fine," my father said nonchalantly, and then tipped his body from the safety of my brother's arms into mine, an instant of weightlessness and then well past the point of no return, his ass crashing hard into the clutch of the chair.

"I think we've got it," he said, tugging his lifejacket in to place. "I think we're fine."

"Good luck!" my brother shouted.

Thanks, I thought. We just might need it.

My father believed in luck. Or maybe it was faith. He had been what I would call a seat-of-the pants fisherman. Sometimes we'd stop by a gas station or tackle shop near whatever lake we'd chosen, to ask where the hot spots were or what bait we should use. But mostly we fished whatever stretch of water was closest with whatever we had in the tackle box. It doesn't matter what you've got on your line or where you put it, my father would always say. If they're hungry you'll catch them. It was simply a matter of persistence and faith.

While there is some modicum of truth to this philosophy (perhaps more than most fishermen are willing to admit) it is neither the most efficient nor the most effective way

to catch fish. We caught fish often but far from always, and though I collected a creel full of fond memories on those trips, it always struck me, as I got older, as a rather unsophisticated way of going about the rather complicated business of catching fish.

And today I wanted my father to catch fish.

**As I maneuvered** the boat into place along the shoreline, a heron rose into the air. It moved with a grace more elegant than any ballerina, its long, grey wings beating with the slow rhythm of a heartbeat. I chose a small red devil for me, an orange flatfish with black spots for him. “This is the shit,” I said as I clipped it to his leader. “This is the one we’ve been catching all this fish with.” I set the motor on low and trolled toward the point, our lines disappearing into the water behind the boat.

“Remember Bowser Bill’s?” I said. “On Vancouver Island? We took a boat just like this out into the Pacific Ocean looking for salmon. Must have been twenty years ago.”

He smiled. “Oh yeah, I remember. More like thirty years ago. I almost drowned us one time, as I recall. The riptides and the ocean swell. Probably shouldn’t have been out there that day.”

We hadn’t spoken of it in decades, but it was a memory we clearly shared. We had risen early that morning and motored out on a calm sea. It was July, as always, but the air was cool and thick, the sharp cut of salt. The boat wasn’t any bigger than this one, certainly not big enough to troll even on a flat sea, and we didn’t have the right tackle besides. He set us up on the edge of the outbound rip and we jigged while the boat floated out on the current. He had heard somewhere that the Buzzbomb was the latest magic, so

our tackle box was full of them—chrome gold, creamy white, blue and pink pearl. We fished in silence, the waves lapping against the side of the boat, gently rocking us enough to raise and lower our rod tips and make the Buzzbombs dance at the end our lines. We often pulled out a menagerie of fish: red snapper, spiny dogfish, every once and a while a silver salmon.

That day, Chris's rod tip lunged toward the water, as if the sea itself was trying to pull him out of the boat and below the surface. My father was sure he had snagged the bottom, so he grabbed the rod from his hands to see if he could break the line. It wouldn't surrender, so he handed it back to Chris and told him to reel. We took turns, he and I, lifting the rod tip as high as our little arms could and then reeling in the line as we lowered it to the surface again. Lift, lower, reel. Lift, lower, reel. Lift, lower, reel.

Twenty minutes later a giant thing stared up at us from the water's surface, its dark eyes bulging from a head the size of a seal's. It was three feet long if it was an inch, a row of sharp spines holding up a long green dorsal fin. We all just stared.

“What is it?” Chris said.

“Can we keep it?” I said.

“No,” my father said. “It's too big. What are we going to do with it?”

But the damn thing had swallowed the hook, and we had to bring it into the boat to set it free. It seemed rather docile by this point, so my father lowered the net and lifted it out of the water—at which point the metre-long monster bucked and twisted in a furious effort to free itself. By the time he had dropped the net on the boat bottom between us, the net's coarse mesh had encased its body like a shroud. My father realized that the fish would die before he could untangle it from the Gordian knot it had made, so

he unsheathed the knife and began to cut the net away. It was not our net to cut (it had come with the boat rental), but there was nothing else to do. A pair of long-nosed pliers allowed him to reach past the beast's sharp teeth to remove the hook and 10 minutes later he heaved it over the side like an anchor.

When we were satisfied the giant fish had descended into the depths from whence it came, we raised our heads and saw what hadn't been there, a biblical sea afroth with white foam and ocean swells that blocked the horizon. When we rose out of the troughs we could see an oil tanker plowing the grey-blue water off our bow, its engorged wake everywhere around us.

My father yanked furiously on the starter cord while Chris and I watched the swells approach, one after the other, the motor coughing and sputtering and finally roaring into life, the boat lurching into motion as we grabbed the gunnels. He turned the bow to face the swollen sea head on at speed, swell after swell heaving our boat into the air, the motor screaming as the propeller cleaved the salt air, the hull crashing against grey-blue wave after grey-blue wave, our over-worked limbic systems awash in a cocktail of fear and awe and a strange kind of joy.

"I thought we were a-goner that day," he said. "You don't know how scared I was that I would drown my own sons."

Wallop Lake was a trifle compared to the Pacific. There weren't any waves here, never mind boat-devouring swells, no monsters lurking in the deep. Just the simple delight of small trout on light tackle.

"We were just boys. We had no idea how much danger we were in, and we were young enough to think you were invincible."



As we rounded the point my father's rod bowed toward the water and he yanked up hard, setting the hook like he'd taught me 30 years ago. Line ripped from his reel into the deep. I told him to tighten his drag and he did, his thick fingers fumbling with the knob. He lifted the silver fish into the boat, smiling like a little boy. I unhooked it and smashed its head on the boat bottom, our first fish together in thirty years.

We caught a half-dozen more before he spoke words I never thought I would hear him speak. He was hunched into his character position: elbows on knees, hands rubbing gently against each other, a quiet agitation. Gathering his nerve.

"I want you to know," he said, "that I don't believe in God anymore."

He said it matter-of-factly, as if he were telling me he'd decided to stop eating cheese. He must be teasing, I thought. He knew I'd pretty much given up on God, or at least on organized religion. On my fridge is a magnet bearing Kurt Vonnegut's mug: "If God were alive today he'd have to be an atheist." Just the summer before we'd gotten into a heated argument about Christianity as the one true religion, about the Christian God as the one true god. I had said it was impossible, given the number of gods and religions that had evolved independently over the millennia all over the world, but he had defended his position fiercely. Now he was telling me it was all hogwash.

"But you've always believed in God."

"That's right," he said. "But now I don't."

I turned down the throttle and pointed the bow of the boat into the middle of the lake. I wanted to focus on what was happening without running us aground.

"This is incredible. When did it happen?"

"I read a book about it, by that biologist guy."

*“The God Delusion? By Richard Dawkins?”*

I was shocked. My whole life he had argued vehemently that Jesus was the literal Son of God who had died for our sins so we could be forgiven and go to heaven. He’d argued that without the hope of resurrection there was no reason for human beings to treat each other with dignity and respect. If there’s no God and no chance of heaven, he’d said, what’s to stop people from stealing and murdering?

“Yeah, that’s the one,” he said, reeling in his line a bit. “The only reason the Church exists is to manipulate people to get their money. It’s all a bunch of bullshit.”

Bullshit? He never swore, and hated when I did.

Our boat droned past the point and headed for the west bay, where I’d watched a loon attack a family of ducks that morning. Another heron rose into the air like an angel.

“Does Mom know about this?” She’d always been more flexible about the nature of Christianity, but even though her understanding of scripture had become more liberal over the years, her belief in God never wavered. It was what protected her against uncertainty and chaos.

“She’s not very happy about it.”

“I don’t suppose she would be. She was probably looking forward to spending eternity in heaven with you. Your new epiphany puts a bit of a damper on that.”

“I don’t tell her what to believe, and she’s going to have to live with my decision. Belief is in the eye of the beholder; there’s no going back.”

I turned the boat for home and we trolled back along the shoreline, where the spruce and pine cast long shadows across the shallow water. My father’s rod tip plunged,

and when he heaved up on it to set the hook the line snapped and sagged on the water's surface.

"Dammit," he said. He reeled in and I stopped the motor. I pulled out a spinner and offered to tie it on his line, but he insisted on doing it himself. I watched silently as he tried in the dim light to thread the barely visible line through the lure's tiny hole. His fat fingers trembled as he squinted in the growing gloom.

"Here, let me do it," I offered. "Let me help."

"I've got it," he said. "I can do it."

His hands, once rock-steady, wouldn't obey him, and his character furrow crept up his brow.

"Don't be so stubborn," I said, sensing the need for an intervention. "It's hard to do in this kind of light. Let me help you with it."

"No," he snapped. "I can do it myself. I'm not too old to tie a lure on my own line."

"It's alright, Dad. It's hard to see. It happens to me all the time. If you let me do it we can get a little more fishing in."

But he insisted, and when he finally gave up it was dark and time to go in.

## NOTES

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- <sup>3</sup> Beevor, Anthony. *The Fall of Berlin 1945*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2002.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Leiserowitz, Ruth. "Memel Territory." *The Greater German Reich and the Jews: Nazi Persecution Policies in the Annexed Territories, 1935-1945*. New York: Berghahn, 2015.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Ganor, Solly. *Light One Candle: A Survivor's Tale from Lithuania to Jerusalem*. New York: Kodansha International, 1995.
- <sup>8</sup> Ganor, Solly. *Light One Candle*. And Leiserowitz, Ruth. "Memel Territory." *The Greater German Reich and the Jews*.
- <sup>9</sup> Leiserowitz, Ruth. *Supra note 5*.
- <sup>10</sup> From [http://wiki-de.genealogy.net/Memeler\\_Straße\\_in\\_Heydekrug](http://wiki-de.genealogy.net/Memeler_Straße_in_Heydekrug), accessed May 15, 2016.
- <sup>11</sup> Leiserowitz, Ruth. *Supra note 5*.
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- <sup>15</sup> Ganor, Solly. "Remembrance." From <http://www.rongreene.com/sollyintro.html>, accessed May 15, 2016.
- <sup>16</sup> Ganor, Solly. *Supra note 7*.
- <sup>17</sup> "The Massacres in Kovno: Reports and Eyewitness Accounts." Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team. <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/einsatz/kovnomassacres.html>, accessed May 15, 2016.
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