

DUST IN THE WIND

A European journey lends personal perspective to the Holocaust

By Eric Lucas

The Ohře River winds through the Czech foothills like an old ribbon, greeting the Elbe in a quiet corner of Bohemia. In the distance, the Sudety Mountains loom. A supple willow and sturdy horse chestnut tree lean out over the caramel water.

Here rest the last earthly remains of my paternal great-grandparents.

Siegmund and Toni Lewin-Richter—retired Jewish residents of Berlin—both died near here during World War II, three generations ago, prisoners of Hitler’s SS in a concentration camp called Theresienstadt, a quarter-mile up the Ohře. Fashioned from an old fortress town named Terezín, it’s where upper-class Jewish Germans, Czechs, and Austrians—intellectuals, artists, and musicians—were sent. Nazis evicted the Czech residents in 1942 and turned a town of 7,000 into a prison camp of 50,000.

Though smaller than camps such as Auschwitz, so many died at Theresienstadt (33,000, all told) that after the first few hundred were buried, dead inmates were cremated. Toward the end of the war, as liberation approached, SS officers trucked thousands of sacks of human ashes to this spot and dumped them in the Ohře, hoping nature would sweep the evidence of their crimes to the North Sea.

I hope, rather, that the placid inertia of the place and its waters sent particles of ash to the river bottom, where they were taken up by the roots of the trees alongside. Then I would be resting in the shade of a willow that holds some essence of my great-grandparents’ substance. The willow sends me honeycomb sunlight, and I notice that some storm or squirrel has tossed a horse chestnut beneath the willow trunk. I pick it up and stash it in a pocket.



The author's paternal great-grandparents, Siegmund (standing at left) and Toni (seated center) Lewin-Richter perished at the Theresienstadt concentration camp during World War II.

Courtesy Peter T. Lucas

A monument along the banks of the Ohře River near Terezín in the Czech Republic memorializes those who died at Theresienstadt.



Eric Lucas



This page, clockwise from left: The main gate, a barracks, and a crematorium await visitors to Theresienstadt. Opposite page, in Poland, the author and his sister stopped at this Uniate church on their way to Regietów.

SURPRISING INFORMATION

The simplest conversation started this weeklong European odyssey. My dad, Peter Lucas, was explaining a bequest he had made to the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, the leading non-governmental organization dedicated to education, confronting anti-Semitism, and teaching lessons of the Holocaust. That was great, but I had no idea why, in particular, the bequest went there.

“Why, my grandparents died in Theresienstadt.” My dad peered over the top of his reading glasses, like a history librarian. “You knew that, I thought.”

I did not. I knew my father’s mother, Margot, was a young belle in Berlin in the Roaring Twenties (think *Cabaret*), who married a globe-trotting journalist, circled the world on their honeymoon, and bore my father. Her husband, Kurt Lubinski, wrote unsparingly of the Nazi rise to power, so the young family fled Germany quite early (1933) for England. Margot became a freelance photographer. During the Blitz, my father was sent to live in the English countryside. They all wound up in the States in the late 1940s after more than a decade as stateless humans. “Lubinski” was transformed into “Lucas” with the aid of the Manhattan phone book.

On the other side of our family, my Ukrainian maternal great-grandparents first met in Connecticut. Pawlo Comcowich and Tecla Tezbir packed up their hopes and ambitions and departed an obscure corner of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1888.

A family history holds tantalizing tidbits of their European provenance, including the names of the towns of their youth.

BUSINESS AND BUSINESS

Last fall, business called me to Warsaw. I conceived the notion of going early, getting a car in Frankfurt, then visiting these key places in both sides of my family’s history. I mentioned this scheme to my sister, Kristin, who instantly joined in. Two months later, we met in the Frankfurt Airport to begin our quest.

After brief visits to the Black Forest and Dresden, we drove over the Ore Mountains into the Czech Republic to Terezín. Though it was offered back to its residents after the war, 60 years later the town still has a stricken quality, like a bewildered old soldier. Two-centuries-old townhouses, some painted in an incongruous lemon-yellow pastel, lined the narrow streets. The gates to a prison yard held the same awful slogan that greeted arrivals at Auschwitz: *ARBEIT MACHT FREI* (“Work brings freedom”).

The visitor’s center is in the building that held the children of Theresienstadt, whose heartbreaking pictures, drawings, and poems line the walls. Seeing these was almost too much to bear; of 15,000 children, fewer than 1,100 survived. We learned that the Jewish families had found SS officers at their doors, promising “contracts” for lifelong room and board in a “retirement” center sponsored by Father Hitler in exchange for all their property and assets.

This is what happened to our great-grandparents. Siegmund was an executive with General Electric; as an engineer, he brought electric power to Berlin. Like so many, he and Toni thought the knock at their door would not happen. They were “transported” September 19, 1942. Forced to hike four miles from the nearest train station to Theresienstadt and housed in an unheated attic, Siegmund caught pneumonia and died soon after. Toni lasted two years.

In the stucco crematorium at the edge of town, a hollow silence painted the walls; a modest placard bore a Jewish lament: *GOD HAS GIVEN, GOD HAS TAKEN. IT IS A WASTE OF THOSE WHO HAVE LEFT AND WILL NEVER RETURN.* Ash still lined the four ovens. Back outdoors, birds chattered in the poplars and the sun shone in a linen sky.

HIDDEN HISTORY

European history is complex. Borders and peoples and rulers have gone back and forth like tides. The family histories of my maternal ancestors, Pawlo Comcowich and Tecla Tezbir, note that, though ethnically Ukrainian, they were born in Galicia, a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the 20th century, Galicia vanished from the map, subsumed by Poland, then the Soviet Union, and then Poland again.

There is a resource to help unravel this. I knew roughly what I was looking for, so I visited viamichelin.com, typed in the village and the

region, and hit “search.” I found nothing for Pregonia and Regetiv—the town names I knew about—but there, in a distant southeast corner of the Polish Carpathian foothills, was a dot labeled “Regietów.”

It didn’t show a road, but that’s where we aimed, doubling back on Tecla’s path, 119 years later.

Poland is a marvelous place of beautiful farmlands, tidy villages, and dynamic people. The whole country has been freshly painted. Construction is under way everywhere—new highways, new plazas, old plazas being rebuilt. Along Carpathian roads visitors still see horse-drawn hay carts; they might also see a farmer driving one, chatting away on his cell phone.

We drove in to Nowy Sącz, and an improbable series of fortunate circumstances began. The only parking space I could find was right by the tourism office. Inside, a helpful lady directed us to a nearby hotel. She’d never heard of Regietów, but in the Hotel Panorama, in an unlit hallway, I noticed a highly detailed map of the region, now called Malopolskie. I took the map down from the wall to a table in the light. There, in the nearby mountains, up an obscure road, and up an obscure track from there, was Regietów.

Next morning, we took off early and drove up and down foothills, into and out of valleys, through villages, from sun to fog to sun. In one little town, a shaft of sun lit a stately old church like a beacon. Our turnoff arrived two miles later. We headed up a valley on a narrow two-lane road to Uście Gorlickie. Here an old Uniate church drew Kristin



Clockwise from left: University of Minnesota/Center for Holocaust & Genocide Studies; ©AA World Travel Library/Alamy; Eric Lucas; philip.greenspun.com



Although Tecla Tezbir spent some time in Regietów, the author found nary a trace of his maternal great-grandmother there in his visit.

to the graveyard to look for family names. She understands some Ukrainian, but found nothing.

So we headed uphill again, passing cattle drovers running their livestock down the road. An odd roadside shrine featured a seated Christ. Fog started to whisk by the car. At the top of the ridge, the road turned past a shuttered church no bigger than a garage, then a decrepit four-unit apartment, then a horse stable, then field and forest. At the next intersection two miles on, we found a sign to Regietów—pointing back the way we came. Back we went to the bleak ridgetop. This was it.

A harsh wind scraped the ground. No one was about. Specks of sleet nipped our cheeks. A lone sheep bleated nearby. Fences sagged. I toed the soil, which is largely crumbled rock.

“Guess we know why she left,” Kristin observed.

I don’t think there’s a particle, not a whisper in the wind, of Tecla Tezbir left here.

EVERLASTING MEMORY

The search for meaning, says Viktor E. Frankl, is the cry of our times. Frankl survived three years

in concentration camps, including time at Theresienstadt, and the book he wrote later, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, is an enduring monument to the human spirit. Our trip to Europe falls within that search, but it is much harder to name what we found. Frankl ascribed meaning to work, family, or purpose, even under the most appalling circumstances.

Kristin and I have known no such circumstances. True, we’ve faced many challenges in our lives, but we’re humbled by the journeys our ancestors made. Tecla Tezbir was only 19 when she left Regietów. What matchless spirit! Siegmund and Toni Lewin-Richter were swallowed up by an appalling work of the devil. What courage just to live at all, even a month!

What I brought back from Regietów is what I’ve had all along, the freedom and opportunity Tecla Tezbir gave her descendants. Having breathed the harsh air and trod the tired ground of that Carpathian ridge she left, I honor her courage every day as I go where I like, say what I think, and work to better my own family’s life.

My keepsake from Terezín, the horse chestnut from the tree beside the Ohře, rested a few months on a cabinet at home. Occasionally I’d hold it in my hand like a meditative charm, its auburn, smooth surface calming to the touch. This spring I laid it an inch deep in some rich soil in the garden out back. A few weeks later, a new shoot from the seed broke ground, headed upward toward the light. **W**

Seattle-based writer Eric Lucas is the author of four travel books and writes for the Los Angeles Times, the Boston Globe, Alaska Airlines Magazine, and other publications.

INSPIRED TO LEARN MORE?

Family History

A good place to start researching your own family history might be to interview elderly family members. They could shed light on who’s who in those old family photos. A good research librarian could also point you in the right direction.

Numerous Internet sites on genealogy include the National Archives (archives.gov/genealogy) and the USGenWeb Project (usgenweb.org). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints maintains extensive genealogical databases available as a free service to the public at familysearch.org. The website also offers research hints and a listing of the church’s many Family History Centers, of which there are several in Southern California.

Museums

In Los Angeles, visit the Museum of Tolerance (9786 W. Pico Boulevard; 310-553-8403; museumoftolerance.com) and the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust (6435 Wilshire Boulevard; 323-651-3704; lamoth.org).

Options farther afield include the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. (202-488-0400; ushmm.org); the Jüdisches Museum Berlin (juedisches-museum-berlin.de); and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem (yadvashem.org).

—Al Bonowitz

For assistance in planning a trip to your ancestral homeland, visit your AAA Travel Agent, call (800) 208-0556, or visit AAA.com/travel.

Eric Lucas