Mountain Gazette

Tombstones of Narol

Eighty years after the liberation of Auschwitz, our writer travels across a rightward-shifting Europe to piece together what happened to his family during the Holocaust

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One night in September 1943, a Jewish mother took her son in one arm and daughter in the other and jumped off a moving train. Her great-grandson returned to the spot 82 years later to report this story.

For David, my father.

A Wooden Box

When I was 5 years old, my father told me his parents were getting a divorce. My grandfather, Louis, had been cheating for a long time. He left my grandmother and moved from New York to Florida with a lover he would later marry.

Louis became estranged from his children and grandchildren. He wouldn't call on my birthdays, respond to my emails, or keep the family photos we mailed him. This was especially hard for my father. Family was everything to him, and Louis was one of the last living witnesses to a story that my father wanted his children to know. My grandfather had been a hidden child during the Holocaust, a Jewish boy pretending to be a Catholic student under the care of the bishop of Fossano, Italy. Louis, his sister, and his parents were separated. They all survived.

In Florida, Louis went on a speaking tour, telling his story in schools and on film. But he never outgrew the habits he developed when he was forced into a double existence during the most formative years of his life. He had needed to lie in order to live. Then the war passed, but the lying never stopped. Louis described being on a train to a concentration camp when a bomb hit the car he was in, and he was spared without a scratch. But I could never find any record of the transport. He claimed he'd joined the partisans at age 10, eaten rodents while patrolling the Alps, and once shot a Nazi in the head. But it's hard to imagine his rescuers letting him leave his hiding places during the war. The general outline of the story contained truths, like the towns where he went into hiding, some of the names of the people who saved his life, and the fact that he and his family experienced great terror under the Nazi regime. I knew those things from what little my great-grandparents had shared with my father when he was a kid. Yet it was clear Louis' narrative had been corrupted by heroic fantasies, the details of which changed noticeably from one telling to the next.

I share all this with empathy for the effects of childhood trauma, effects Louis spoke openly about. Oscar-winning filmmaker and Holocaust survivor Aviva Slesin once asked him in an interview if he was aware of his feelings while he was in hiding. He said, "Feelings were something you simply did not have the luxury of having. Feelings would betray you. Feelings would cause you to do something that would harm you and the people around you."

That interview took place in 1999, shortly before Louis retired from his law firm and divorced my grandmother, and in it he confessed that he still carried that same mindset from his childhood. “In 1942, after all, I was 8 years old; in 1945, I was 11 years old. That’s when I think you develop most of your being and identity,” he said. “It even goes as far as my relationship with my wife of 42 years, with my children, and even my grandchildren. I’m afraid if I form an attachment, it will be taken away from me, and therefore, I deprive myself in the first instance.”

Occasionally, one of his interviews or presentations was posted online, and my father and I would watch it. Even though Louis wanted little to do with us, even though we knew how unreliable a narrator he was, his testimonies were all we had to connect us to a family history that felt important enough to preserve, even in an imperfect form.

Some years passed. I became a journalist, and I began to think about trying to write an accurate version of my family’s story. I decided to go to Florida to see my grandfather and find out what documentation he’d kept from the war. I arrived at his house in a brand-new gated community in Palm City, Florida, on March 23, 2022. I hadn’t seen him in more than eight years. I was 26. He was 88. He had heart problems and, we suspected, Parkinson’s disease. He had bruises on his face and scabs on his arms from falls. He took slow, stiff, crooked steps toward me. He smiled.

We made small talk, and I asked if I could see the things he’d kept from the Holocaust. He had me find a wooden box buried in a cabinet in his bedroom, and we went through it together. There were old passports, letters from Louis’ rescuers, and photographs of my great-grandparents. I didn’t know much about Louis’ parents or what they’d experienced during the war. There were my great-grandmother’s identification papers, stamped *Juif* (French for “Jew”) in red ink. There were cards issued by aid organizations to my great-grandfather, who had been enslaved in a coal mine. And there was one document in particular that caught my attention: a copy of my great-grandmother’s unpublished memoir from the early 1980s, written shortly before she passed away. It was a short document, just 18 pages, but everything in it was carefully detailed. She wrote of her difficult childhood in Austria-Hungary, moving to Belgium and starting a family, fleeing to the Pyrénées when the Nazis invaded, and jumping off a moving train with her children in her arms. These were stories I never knew, stashed away in a box all along.

I'd always assumed Louis had had false memories. That wouldn't have been unusual for a child survivor. But it wasn't until that day that I realized he had intentionally ignored his mother's account. Moreover, in his own unpublished manuscript that he showed me, he wrote, "I am making a concerted effort NOT to 'research' or try to 'verify' events and circumstances which were related to me. Instead, I will tell them as if they were the truth inviolate."

His disregard for the truth bothered me, both as a journalist and as a Jew. It felt as if he was trivializing the facts of the Holocaust. Six million Jews were murdered. That was two-thirds of Europe's Jewish population and 40% of the world's, killed between 1933 and 1945. They were gassed, hanged, starved, shot, and tortured to death. Millions of non-Jewish Poles and Soviet prisoners of war, hundreds of thousands of Romani people and people with disabilities, and thousands of Jehovah's Witnesses and gay men were murdered too. No exaggeration is needed to convey the horrors of Nazi Germany. The truth is ever so important as far-right nationalism makes a 21st-century comeback in Europe and the United States.

After Louis died in February 2024, I decided it was time for me to take over telling the family story. But first, I had to find out what had really happened. I searched through thousands of pages of wartime documents, listened to hundreds of hours of testimonies from survivors who had crossed paths with my family, and traveled to Belgium, France, Switzerland, Italy, and Poland. I reconnected with my father's cousin, Shelley English, who had another of my great-grandmother's memoirs—this one written in 1952. Shelley had been researching our shared ancestry for decades and introduced me to distant relatives I'd never known. She also took me to interview her mother, Louis' sister, Regina.

Eighty years after liberation, I have finally written my family's story accurately. It's a love story. It's a story of great heroes who risked their lives for my family. And it's a story of a mother whose bravery kept her children alive.

Orphans

The sweet, eggy scent of fresh challah bread filled their home. It was a modest dwelling in the plains of the Austrian province of Galicia. Twelve-year-old Deborah Sandbank, my great-grandmother, and her mother, Ruchel, were baking for the Sabbath when the men of the 1st Don Cossack Division of the Russian Imperial Army came to their door with spears raised.

“Run away,” one said, threatening to kill them if they stayed. They had no time to put on shoes. Six children were still living at home, and Ruchel hurried them out the door. Her husband, Leib, had arthritis and struggled to walk, but the children helped him along as they hiked several kilometers into the hills until the sun set and they fell over sobbing, too exhausted to continue. They hid in the woods for two days before beginning the slow march back to find rubble and ash where they had left their house behind. The chimney was all that remained, standing in the smoke like a headstone.

Before the fire, there were two poor but proud towns, Narol and Lipsko, joined by a narrow bridge over a trickling river. Narol was the bigger of the two, with about 2,100 residents, mostly farmers and craftspeople, half of whom were Jewish. In Lipsko, on the eastern bank, lived 470 Jews, the Sandbanks among them. Leib was the town’s assessor and registrar, a *mohel*, and a *baal tefillah*. Although the two towns were separate in their governments, they made up one Jewish community, sharing a big synagogue on the street that connected them. It was a community strong in faith but absent of wealth. Even Leib, a prominent man in Narol and Lipsko, brought home a meager living. He fathered 11 children, the oldest born in 1880, the youngest in 1909. What he could not provide for them with earnings, he aimed to replace with God’s grace. Most Galician Jews were followers of an Orthodox movement called Hasidism, which originated in the region in the 18th century, emphasizing simplicity and joy in one’s devotion to God. When Leib was not occupied with town affairs, he prayed and studied the Talmud.

In less mystical ways, Ruchel was the family’s provider. She grew potatoes and other vegetables, and raised chickens, geese, and two cows on her own. She sold the chickens’ eggs and the cows’ milk. She washed and mended the children’s clothes and did all she could to conceal their poverty. “If anyone were to walk into the home, he might think wealthy people lived there, everything was so lovely and clean, and the children were dressed so neatly,” Deborah would write in 1952.

Jews in Narol and Lipsko spoke Yiddish but also learned Polish in school. All the children went to an integrated secular school through eighth grade, and the Jewish children had *heder* in the evenings. Only some continued their secular studies in Galicia’s capital city, Lemberg—modern-day Lviv, Ukraine—75 kilometers southeast of Lipsko. One of Deborah’s older brothers wanted to study there so badly that he worked as a private tutor to pay his own

way. But Leib, who believed his son was desecrating the Sabbath, demanded that he drop out before he finished his degree.

Deborah was sad to see her brother give up his dream, but she was also grateful for the money he sent home after he took a job as a landowner's assistant instead. "Things became a bit easier for my mother," she wrote. "So what does G-d do? In the 14th year, war breaks out, and everything is ruined."

It was the First World War. In August 1914, one month after Deborah's 12th birthday, Russian troops entered Galicia and began a series of battles that devastated the unified armies of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. One hundred thousand of their soldiers were killed in just three weeks on the Eastern Front. The Russians' Don Cossack cavalrymen soon invaded Narol and Lipsko, and the Sandbanks were forced to flee. Austria's own soldiers burned down the towns as they retreated, leaving nothing for the Russians to plunder.

After they found their home in ruins, the Sandbanks walked 7 kilometers to Brzeziny, a village where one of Deborah's older sisters lived. She had a baby and a small house, with little space for anyone else, but her family knew nowhere else to go. Deborah collected kindling, which she carried back in bundles on her bony shoulders. She scavenged for potatoes in the fields. Her bare feet were covered in dirt and sores. Her dark hair, usually parted and combed and cut to her earlobes, was growing knotted. Ruchel could not watch her children suffer like this, so she returned to Lipsko, where she slept on the floor of a neighbor's house that had been spared from the blaze and milked the cows to trade some milk for stale rye bread.

The Austrians soon returned, pushing their line of defense to the east, covering a distance of 90 kilometers from north to south. The Sandbanks found shelter in barracks, where they did not have to pay rent, and Deborah was hopeful that they would recover from their tragedy. But the war brought with it epidemics of cholera and typhus as thousands of troops passed through while access to clean water and sanitation was limited. Ruchel became ill with cholera and died within a few hours. One of Deborah's sisters died the next day, as did a brother the day after. Two weeks later, Deborah lost her father. The youngest of her older brothers, Mordechai, was conscripted into the army. That left three orphans in Lipsko—Deborah and her sisters, 14-year-old Berta and 5-year-old Beila—grieving and with no choice but to take care of each other.

Lemberg was facing shortages of supplies and food as the war carried on. In the countryside, Deborah could obtain provisions more easily than those confined to the city. She borrowed money to buy sugar, belted it around her waist, and asked a neighbor who smuggled food to Lemberg to take her there and teach her how to sell it. “Out of sympathy for me, she did,” Deborah wrote. With her profits, she paid her debt, filled a pack with more provisions, and started making the journey to Lemberg alone. “I was not searched,” she said. “I was a child, so it was assumed that I was on my way to school.” Every other day, she went by train from the station in Bełżec, about 10 kilometers away. After a few weeks, Deborah had earned enough money that she and her sisters could buy underwear and replace the wooden clogs they’d been wearing with leather shoes. While Deborah traveled, Berta worked on farms in exchange for corn and wheat to bake for her sisters over an open fire.

Now properly clothed and better fed, Deborah, Berta, and little Beila could build a new place to live. They mixed mortar and carried bricks, and with the help of a mason, they finished a single room to share. Others rebuilt their homes too, and a vibrant community returned. There was a weekly farmers market in the Narol square and big celebrations, like on Purim, when Jews dressed as kings and queens performed plays in the streets. Deborah continued trading in Lemberg and was able to put together a dowry for Berta, who married a Torah scribe. Then it was just Deborah and Beila. “We really loved each other, like two little swallows,” Deborah wrote. She bought Beila a sewing machine and paid for her sewing lessons, and when Beila started working as a seamstress, she made Deborah new clothes. They were finally enjoying their independence, and they didn’t give a thought to a dowry for Deborah. “I was lucky with boys. They all wanted to marry me even though I had no dowry,” Deborah wrote. One was a tailor two years older than her.

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Joseph Schneider came from a family of tailors. His father, Isack Schneider, of Lipsko, was the official tailor of the Narol fire department, appointed by resolution passed in 1888. Their name likely goes back to 1789, when Jews in Austria, who generally just used first names, were required by law to adopt surnames from the German language. The German word for tailor was a befitting choice.

When Joseph was young, four of his older brothers, tailors too, left Lipsko for the United States. This was typical of Jewish families in Galicia at the turn of the century. Political shifts gave greater influence to Catholic leaders, many of whom held antisemitic views. Pogroms were increasing in frequency and intensity. There were organized boycotts of Jewish businesses. New legislation barred Jews from working in the salt and wine industries, leaving tens of thousands of people without incomes. Especially in Narol and Lipsko, relations between Jews and Christians were strained. Jews there were kidnapped, beaten, and murdered by local Poles on several occasions in the early 20th century. In a 1998 interview with the USC Shoah Foundation, one Naroler, Arthur Green, would remember Catholics throwing rocks into his home on Good Friday because they blamed Jews for killing their Lord. Faced with such hardships and hate, roughly 237,000 Galician Jews emigrated to the United States between 1881 and 1910. Joseph wanted to join his brothers, but, by the time he was of age, the United States had begun limiting immigration from Eastern Europe.

World War I ended in November 1918, bringing major political change to Galicia. The Austro-Hungarian Empire and its ally Germany were defeated, and Narol and Lipsko fell within the borders of a newly independent Poland. Joseph was conscripted into the nascent Polish army but soon decided to leave his country. Isack, his father, had died a few years earlier. Then Joseph lost his mother, Rifka, not long after he began his service. He was left with only his oldest brother, Mechel, and younger sister, Channah, in Poland, with most of his siblings living in New York. Hoping to reach the United States, Joseph stowed away on a cargo ship bound for Charleston, South Carolina, but was caught and sent back to Europe before he could step foot on the palmetto-lined coast.

Joseph continued seafaring over the next decade, traveling throughout North Africa and Western Europe, searching for someplace to settle down. In Antwerp, Belgium, he found a good Jewish community and became a partner and master tailor at a menswear business. Though it had been years since he'd left Poland, he had not forgotten about his childhood sweetheart, Deborah—Dora, he called her. Now that he'd set up a future for himself in Antwerp, he returned to Lipsko, where he found her, 28 years old and engaged to another man. He asked Deborah to marry him instead and promised her a better life, far from the *shtetl*.

Lebensraum

In March 1931, Deborah arrived in Antwerp, where her fiancé was waiting for her. They were married two months later and moved into an apartment in the city center with floral wallpaper and big windows from which they could see into the zoo across the street.

My grandfather, Louis, was born at the first dawn of 1934. “My husband was among the happiest of men,” Deborah wrote. She was happy too. But she felt as if her family remained incomplete without her beloved sister.

About a month after Deborah arrived in Belgium, she petitioned the Ministry of Justice in Brussels to grant a visa to Beila. As immigrants, Joseph and Deborah lived under government surveillance and had to appear periodically before the Antwerp police. Written reports highlighted Joseph’s work and income. They needed to be able to support themselves. With Beila being a single woman without a job lined up, the request for her immigration was denied. But Joseph would spare no expense for Deborah’s happiness, so he hired an attorney to help them bring Beila to Belgium. Deborah wrote, “The day she arrived was a happy day for us. She stayed with us for some time. My husband was like a father to her, and I beamed with joy.”

In September 1935, Beila married a 27-year-old merchant named Wolf Engelard. They moved into a townhouse a few doors down the street from Joseph and Deborah, and, a little over a year later, Beila gave birth to a daughter, Rachel. A little more than a year after that, on Jan. 16, 1938, Deborah gave birth to her own daughter, Regina.

It was a time filled with joy and togetherness, like the summer trips the Schneiders and Engelards took to Middelkerke, where they played on the sandy beaches with their children. But not far away, across the border in Germany, a dictator was unleashing violence upon the Jewish people. It would not be long before he came for them in Belgium, too. For Deborah, it was like the outbreak of the first war all over again. “What does G-d do?” she wrote, echoing herself. “He sends a Hitler and destroys our lives.”

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Twenty years earlier, in September 1919, Adolf Hitler, an Austrian-born German soldier, showed up to a meeting of a new far-right political group that would soon name itself the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, better known as the Nazi party. Hitler had a

command of fascist rhetoric that quickly advanced him into a party leadership position. His ideology was rooted in a belief that the success of Germany depended on seizing territory and expanding throughout Europe, and, in doing so, eliminating the millions of Jews that lived there.

The years following the First World War saw rising antisemitism in Germany. The mass casualties of the war, the nation's defeat, and then the economic depression beginning in 1929 brought blame upon leftist leaders, several of whom were Jewish. There was growing belief in a baseless conspiracy theory that communist Jews were operating a traitorous deep state intent on dismantling Germany, gaining influence throughout Europe, and enriching themselves in the process. The myth that a Jewish cabal instigates and profits from global conflicts was not new in the 20th century and has not been retired in modern times. But Hitler, with his captivating oratory, weaponized Jewish stereotypes at a time when Germany was eager to point a finger at anyone who seemed different from the majority-Christian population.

In the Nazi party platform Hitler presented in February 1920, he publicly declared the Nazis' plan to revoke German citizenship from Jews, repeal their civil rights, and segregate them from the rest of German society. He promised he could revitalize the country by ridding it of the current, ostensibly corrupt system. Despite his extreme views, Hitler gained many admirers in the 1930s as economic conditions worsened and millions of Germans lost their jobs. The Nazi flag—a red-and-white banner with a black swastika at its center—came to signify hope, as was Hitler's intention when he appropriated its design from an ancient symbol for good fortune. At the height of the depression, in July 1932, the Nazis received more than 37% of the vote in the parliamentary elections. The party had gone from a fringe movement, having previously received less than 3% of the vote in 1928, to the largest party in Germany. In January 1933, under political pressure, German president Paul von Hindenburg appointed Hitler as chancellor.

One month into Hitler's chancellorship, on Feb. 27, the Reichstag, the German parliament building, burned down. The real reason is unknown, but Hitler cast blame on communist terrorists, resulting in enough panic to sway Hindenburg to pass an emergency decree suspending freedom of speech and other constitutional rights. It gave the Nazis near-limitless power to make arrests without due process, and in March they established Germany's first concentration camp, near the town of Dachau, to imprison suspected political opponents. One month later, a Jewish man named Arthur Kahn, wrongfully accused of being a communist, was

shot and killed by a guard there. He was the first of six million Jews to be murdered by the Nazis.

Following Hindenburg's death at 86 years old, in August 1934, Hitler secured the support of the military and declared himself dictator of Germany. In the years to come, the Nazis continued building concentration camps and enacted hundreds of laws restricting Jews' participation in public life. There were limits to how many Jews could attend public schools. They were banned from holding various jobs. Their passports were stamped with the letter "J" so they could easily be identified and discriminated against. It did not matter if they practiced Judaism or not. By Nazi definition, anyone who had at least three Jewish grandparents was Jewish, even if they were an atheist or had converted to Christianity.

The lucky ones were able to leave Europe before it was too late. My grandmother—Louis' first wife, Evelyn—was born in Frankfurt in 1936. Her parents had just enough money and the right connections in the United States to arrange for their immigration after Kristallnacht—the Night of Broken Glass—when the Nazis led a series of attacks on Jews across Germany on Nov. 9, 1938. Their synagogues were set ablaze. Their businesses and homes were destroyed. Shattered glass from their windows littered the streets. One hundred Jews were murdered. Thirty thousand Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps. One month later, my grandmother and her parents were starting their lives over in New York. Not many European Jews had that opportunity.

The Second World War began on Sept. 1, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland. Within weeks, Nazis took control of the western half of the country. They removed hundreds of thousands of Poles from their homes, settled half a million Germans there, and rounded up Jews for forced labor.

When the Germans reached Narol, they drove their tanks down the main street and set fire to the synagogue and Jewish residences. One survivor, Charles Schechter, would recall in a 1998 interview that a German soldier broke down the door to his family's home, yelled "Pigs! Get out!" and then threw an incendiary grenade into the house as they ran away. Jews who did not flee were shot. The Nazis soon established a labor camp spanning Narol and Lipsko, where Jewish inmates were forced to grind up tombstones stolen from the Jewish cemetery so the fragments could be used to pave a nearby road.

Following Germany's success in the east, Hitler launched an invasion of the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. The Luftwaffe dropped bombs on train stations and aerodromes across the Low Countries in the early hours of May 10, 1940. The sounds of shooting and airplanes woke Joseph and Deborah at 3 a.m. They carried their children down to the cellar, where they waited for a lull in the fighting.

Tens of thousands of Jews in Belgium decided to evacuate in the days after the German invasion. Joseph and Wolf ran around Antwerp for hours before they could find a driver who would take them to Ostend, where Joseph thought they might be able to get on a boat to England. Deborah packed a few necessities and 50,000 francs in cash, then bundled up Regina and put her and Louis into the back of the car. But Wolf refused to get in and wouldn't let his wife or daughter to go either. There was no time to argue. Deborah said a tearful goodbye to Beila. "It was as though we already knew that was the last time we would see each other," she wrote. She and Joseph got in the car, and the driver took them away.

Hypotension and Other Matters of Luck

I was not prepared for the portable toilet. On Aug. 27, 2024, I traveled 5,000 miles from my home in Colorado to the last place Deborah and Beila ever held each other. It was marked with a porta-potty on the side of the street, right in front of the brick building where my family once lived. Some paving had just been done. I wasn't expecting a gold-plated plaque, but in all of my anxious anticipation for the emotions I might feel upon going there, never did I imagine having to share that space with a big plastic box containing the whatevers of who knows how many road workers. I stood over a crushed cigarette carton and some other litter on dusty cobblestones and watched a man carrying a bag full of groceries unlock the front door and step inside. I hoped he liked his home.

I turned to my right and took 30 steps to the gray stucco townhouse where Beila and Wolf used to live. I marveled at its symmetrical windows and the way the light cast across its little wrought-iron balcony. I wished so badly they had not stayed. I returned twice the next day, obsessing over their house, as if I stood there long enough, a portal would appear and I could yell into it: "Go with your sister!" I left Antwerp with an uneasy feeling, like I'd left someone

behind, and I carried that feeling with me for the next two weeks as I traced my family's path across Europe.

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There was no reprieve from the bombings when my family arrived in Ostend, so Joseph, Deborah, and their children continued by car from city to city until they arrived at the train station in Brussels with no better option than the next train for France. Joseph did not want to go. "He began to cry like a little child," Deborah wrote. But she grabbed their small suitcase, took the children, and pushed through the crowd boarding the train. Joseph followed. He understood they could not stay there, and they obviously couldn't go east. France was facing its own invasion, but it was a strong country, and many believed it would persevere.

Nobody had tickets. No one even knew exactly where in France the train was heading. They just piled in as bombs continued to fall nearby. "I do not know to this day how this train could leave Brussels after those bombardments," said Sigi Hart in a 1994 Shoah Foundation testimony. It took more than a week for the train to traverse Belgium and France, moving in short bursts, stopping to wait out bombings. There was little food along the way, but, every so often, when the train stopped at a station, aid workers passed out bread and milk. Finally, the train reached southern France, beyond the Nazi offensive. But no stations would allow the refugees to disembark, so the train continued until it could go no farther. "It's really the end of the line. The train stopped, and there were no more rails. I mean, it was the end of France," said Hart. They had reached Bagnères-de-Luchon, a ski and spa town on the north slope of the Pyrénées.

It's hardly hyperbolic to say that Luchon is "the most beautiful place in the world," as survivor Bracha Scheinman would call it in a 1998 Shoah Foundation testimony. The mountainsides surrounding Luchon are steep and lush, in contrast to Belgium's flatlands and Antwerp's urban streets. An aid committee was formed, the refugees were given hotel rooms and food, the children were placed in school, and the immediate chaos subsided. But for the first time, the war would separate the Schneider family. Even though they'd lived in Belgium for years, Joseph and Deborah were still Polish citizens, and the government of German-occupied Poland still existed as a government-in-exile based in France. This meant that Joseph, and all other Polish men in France, could be conscripted into the army because of an agreement between the French and

Polish heads of state hoping to join forces against the Nazis. As the Germans advanced and France struggled to assemble enough soldiers, Joseph was taken into service. Deborah did not know exactly where he was sent. She received only a terse postcard from him: “Take care of yourself and the children.”

“I thought I would go mad,” Deborah wrote. Some of the Jews who’d arrived in Luchon attempted to hike over the Pyrénées into Spain, but not everyone was able to evade the border guards. Deborah couldn’t even think about crossing with a 6-year-old and a 2-year-old without Joseph.

She received nothing from him for weeks. Then, one night, Deborah heard a rapping on the door. When she opened it, Joseph was standing there, barefoot with swollen legs. But his return did not bring good news. The army had scattered, and on June 22, France signed an armistice with Germany, splitting the country into a northern Occupied Zone, where the swastika now flew over the Eiffel Tower in Paris, and a southern Unoccupied Zone, where the French government reformed itself in the spa town of Vichy.

Luchon was still in the Unoccupied Zone, but that did not guarantee safety for long. Many French people already thought their country was burdened by refugees, who were seen as rivals for jobs and threats to French culture even before the war. France had encouraged immigration in the 1920s after losing nearly one and a half million soldiers in the First World War. By 1931, foreigners composed 7% of the population. France’s welcoming immigration policies took a drastic swing in the late 1930s as it set up several internment camps in the south to hold the large number of Spanish refugees fleeing the Spanish Civil War. The influx of Jewish refugees in the spring of 1940 added to the previous decade’s increasing xenophobia, and the problem escalated that summer when the Nazis started expelling German Jews to France’s Unoccupied Zone. Now France found itself defeated, divided, short on resources, and with hundreds of thousands of unwanted outsiders to take the blame. On Oct. 3, 1940, France passed the “*Loi Portant Statut des Juifs*,” or “Law on the Status of Jews,” which excluded Jews from high-ranking public-service positions as well as occupations that could influence public opinion, including teaching, journalism, and theater. The next day, the government authorized the arbitrary imprisonment of foreign Jews. It was up to the prefects—the officials in charge of regional departments in France—to decide what to do within their jurisdictions. The fates of refugees often depended on how much money they had. Those with little were usually interned

in camps, while the privileged ones able to support themselves could be assigned to residences under police surveillance.

It would be a mistake to assume France's new antisemitic policies implied frictionless collaboration with the Nazis. In the beginning, the Nazis viewed unoccupied France as "an ideal dumping ground for Germany's Jews," wrote historians Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton in their book *Vichy France and the Jews*. But France viewed the unsolicited transports of Jews into its territory as an affront to what little sovereignty it had left. In short, each wanted to send its Jews to the other, and neither wanted to accept them. France could only hope for the day Germany would take theirs back.

Refugees in Luchon were sent to internment camps soon after Vichy enacted the law of Oct. 4. A drummer boy marched up and down the streets in step with his beats, shouting, "*Avis*!" ("Announcement!") Foreign Jews were directed to the train station to be transferred to some undisclosed place. When they arrived at the platform, they found not normal passenger trains but rather cattle cars waiting for them. "I'd never seen a train like that," said Gisele Stevens, a survivor, in a 1997 testimony. She continued, "They slid open the door, and I saw that it was packed with people." They were shipped to the camps that had been built during the Spanish Civil War, where food was scarce and living conditions were miserable. Sigi Hart, who was taken to a camp in Agde, said he slept on straw sacks in crowded barracks surrounded by barbed wire.

The Schneiders never boarded the train to the camps. Instead, they paid a man for a ride out of town, and, at 4 a.m., they rode west 50 kilometers to Bagnères-de-Bigorre, another spa town in a different department than Luchon, under another prefect, who seemed less eager to intern foreign Jews. "We found a place to live. There were more than 30 people living in that house, all cooking in the same kitchen and eating at the same table. You can imagine what that was like," Deborah wrote.

It wasn't the life she'd had in Antwerp, but she was happy with how things were going in Bagnères-de-Bigorre at the beginning. Right away, she and Joseph applied for non-worker residency permits, which they would have to renew every month but would allow them to continue living in Bagnères-de-Bigorre legally. Louis was making friends and learning to speak French in school. He and Joseph took walks together on wooded trails nearby. "It was a very

good time at that point for a kid. At first, it was relatively pleasant, it was relatively safe," Louis said in a 1997 Shoah Foundation testimony. Others who came to Bagnères-de-Bigorre would remember that time similarly. But not everything came so easy. Joseph and Deborah were taking risks to feed their children. France's produce was in short supply during the war. Refugees could get ration cards, but the rationing system was poorly managed, the lines were long, and the portions were small. It was common, even for French citizens, to shop on the black market. But Jews were punished for it far more frequently than non-Jews.

The police in Bagnères-de-Bigorre were receiving complaints about Jewish refugees buying large quantities of milk from a woman on the street near the entrance to town. They worked in pairs, passing bottles back and forth as the milkwoman filled them, according to police surveilling the scene. And they would pay a premium, more than two francs per liter, so their ration cards wouldn't be cut. The commissaire of Bagnères-de-Bigorre wrote in a letter to the prefect, "Their actions are being unfavorably commented on by the population, which does not understand why foreigners are allowed to monopolize essential food items, such as milk or butter, simply because they have substantial financial means."

There were big groups participating in these milk deals, moving 50 liters of milk per day. But the police just wanted to arrest one pair and put them in a detention camp to "set a necessary example and encourage their co-religionists to comply more willingly with the current restrictions," the commissaire wrote. It was Joseph's bad luck that, on the morning of Nov. 19, he was caught along with his accomplice, Icek Nasanowiez, a 36-year-old Polish diamond cutter who'd also come from Belgium with a wife and two children and was living in the same crowded house as the Schneiders. At the police station, Joseph signed a statement—written in French, a language he did not understand—confessing that he and Nasanowiez had the right to buy a total of three liters of milk but intended to buy six. Both of them were charged with milk trafficking and taken to the camp in Agde.

Deborah spent the next month desperately trying to free Joseph. Unlike her husband's, her French was good. She wrote a letter to the prefect: "I beg you to act with clemency. I have two children, the youngest is 2 years old, and my husband's presence is necessary for me." Then she went to his office in Tarbes, bringing Louis and Regina along, where the woman at the front took one look at Joseph's record, then slapped Deborah across the face. "You swindling milk dealers!" the woman shouted, kicking Deborah out.

As she stood crying outside the prefecture, a man approached to see what was wrong. “I told him and showed him my two little children, for whom my husband had gone out to buy milk,” Deborah wrote in her 1952 memoir. He took her by the hand and led her back into the anteroom before continuing on his own into the prefect’s office. When Deborah was called in, she was only told to return in eight days for an answer. “The eight days were like eight years to me,” she continued.

The prefect wanted to be sure that Joseph’s internment had been a successful deterrent. After confirming that milk trafficking had completely stopped in Bagnères-de-Bigorre, he signed off on the release of both Joseph and Nasanowiez. They were reunited with their families in January 1941. But Deborah practically locked Joseph up at home, fearing he would get arrested again if he went out. Since the black market was now out of the question, Deborah started working for the baker in exchange for bread, and for the butcher, who gave her meat, and for the grocer—“for anyone from whom I knew I would be able to get food. I did not spare any effort to keep my children from being hungry.” She gave bread to other families in need, and sent packages of food to people in the camps, too. “I was still out free. I was content with everything so long as we were left alone,” she wrote.

The situation was getting worse for Jews across France in 1941. A revised Jewish Statute, encouraged by the Germans and enacted on June 2, further restricted the professions Jews could hold, and it gave prefects power to intern any Jew, even a French citizen. But Joseph and Deborah weren’t bothered for almost a year and a half. Until one day, at the beginning of May 1942, dozens of foreign Jews living in Bagnères-de-Bigorre were told to report to the police to prove they had enough savings to live on. Otherwise, they would be sent to a camp. Joseph and Deborah took all the money they had to the station, where gendarmes recorded the serial number of each bill so they couldn’t pass it on to save the next person. Those who had sufficient funds were allowed to proceed to assigned residences in Cauterets, about an hour’s drive away. The Vichy government, still hesitant to intern all of the Jews living in the Unoccupied Zone, had started moving those who could pay their living expenses to remote resort towns where there were vacant vacation rentals.

Cauterets is surrounded by mountains except for the steep and winding road in and out, giving the refugees there the sense that they had been placed into a cage like mice awaiting a

serpent's dinnertime. Food was especially hard to come by. Herbert Korner, one refugee who lived in Cauterets, later said he had to dig up roots to eat. The Schneiders moved into a small room on a narrow side street near the town square. As hard as things were, they hoped to finally find relief in this quiet village. But what little optimism they had left was eroded by the news that the Germans had just taken their first trainload of Jews from France to Poland. It was Joseph and Deborah's greatest fear that they would be next.

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The United States entered the war in 1941, allying with the Soviet Union and bringing the conflict to a global scale. Germany now needed France's unwavering cooperation, which meant it could no longer use the Unoccupied Zone as its dumping ground. The Nazis needed a lasting solution to the so-called "Jewish Question," that being, "What to do with the vile animals poisoning the blood of Europe?"

Emigration wasn't working as the Nazis had hoped. France was bitterly receiving Jews from Germany, and the Germans were encouraging France to send them elsewhere. But piles of paperwork and a scarcity of shipping vessels left many eligible refugees stranded. Not to mention that the United States had strict immigration quotas in place, as did Switzerland and Great Britain. The Dominican Republic, Bolivia, and China were open to refugees. Still, emigration required a French exit visa, release papers if the emigrants were assigned residence or interned in a camp, Spanish and Portuguese transit visas to reach the ships departing from Lisbon, an entry visa into another country, and enough money to pay for the voyage. Backlogs and poor administrative coordination meant applications went missing or weren't returned in time.

The Nazis were already comfortable killing Jews. First was Arthur Kahn, who was immediately followed by three others at the Dachau concentration camp. Then there was Kristallnacht. And early in the war, as German troops moved east, execution squads followed, machine-gunning 2 million suspected communists, including 1.3 million Jews, along the way. But even after shooting and expelling millions of Jews, there were still millions left. So, in late 1941, the Nazis began experimenting with more efficient execution methods, using poison gas. Germany quickly and discreetly constructed several killing centers in occupied Poland, including one in Bełżec, near Narol, where Deborah used to get the train to Lemberg. The tracks were laid for the Nazis'

“Final Solution,” and they could now address Vichy’s concerns. But the Nazis were not only willing to take away the displaced Jews in France—they insisted on taking every Jew in Europe.

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Just as Joseph was settling into Cauterets, in June 1942, he was selected for one of the *Groupements de Travailleurs Étrangers*, foreign workers groups known by the abbreviation GTE. Vichy used these battalions as an alternative to camps or assigned residences for male refugees fit for harsh labor. Some GTEs, for example, were building France’s Trans-Saharan Railway in Algeria. Joseph was assigned agricultural work at a farm in Mérilheu, a few kilometers from Bagnères-de-Bigorre. “We wept and wailed, then we comforted ourselves; at least he did not have to go to Poland or to Germany,” Deborah wrote.

Again, she was left alone with Louis and Regina, and she began to suffer from stress. She was losing weight; she couldn’t sleep; she was experiencing chest pain and low blood pressure. In late July, she went to see a doctor, Charles Thierry, who wrote her a medical certificate requesting that the prefect grant her permission to leave her assigned residence for a month to undergo treatment with a specialist at the thermal baths in Bagnères-de-Bigorre. The prefect considered allowing it, but not without checking with the police first. The commissaire in Cauterets expressed his skepticism, suggesting in a letter to the prefect that her illness might have been an excuse to move closer to Joseph. “It seems that a connection could be made between Mme. Schneider’s request and her husband’s stay near Bagnères,” he wrote.

Meanwhile, in early August, Deborah, Louis, and Regina were added to a list. The Germans wanted to deport 32,000 Jews from the Unoccupied Zone by the end of the summer. To gather enough bodies, Vichy sent secret orders to prefects to prepare for the mass arrest of foreign Jews beginning before dawn on the 26th. At least some of the Jews in Cauterets, including the memoirist Leo Bretholz, received a tip from the mayor about the incoming raid. Bretholz hid out in the mountains with a few others, but Deborah must have missed the warning.

At 5 a.m. on Aug. 26, five gendarmes came banging on Deborah’s door. “Wake up your children and come with us,” one said.

Deborah told him her children had fevers and her husband was gone. “Let me stay here,” she pleaded.

“Come with us at once!” He pointed at his club.

Just as she was about to surrender, Deborah looked over at her children, her blood pressure plummeted, and she fainted.

Louis ran out the door, past the gendarmes shouting at him, a few hundred meters through the town center to wake Dr. Thierry at his home. “My mother is lying dead!” Louis cried. Dr. Thierry hurried to the Schneiders’ place and told the gendarmes that Deborah couldn’t go anywhere. With her passed out on the floor, the gendarmes did not object. On the arrest list, they marked her as ill. Next to Louis and Regina’s names, they wrote *mère malade*, “sick mother,” then moved on to the next person.

Dr. Thierry gave Deborah some medicine and the children some food and returned several times to check on her. He could have been arrested for aiding a Jew, but he would help any way he could. Deborah’s primary concern was her children’s safety, so she asked Dr. Thierry to send a telegram to the Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants—the children’s aid society, commonly known as the OSE—requesting that they come “collect two packages.”

The OSE was founded by Jewish doctors in 1912 to provide medical care for victims of pogroms in Russia. After the outbreak of World War II, it focused on rescuing Jewish children from French internment camps and placing them in homes throughout the Unoccupied Zone. The roundups of 1942 forced many parents like Deborah to make an agonizing decision: Hold on to their children and risk deportation together, or give them up and entrust the OSE to save them.

Two days later, a woman came to Cauterets to pick up Louis and Regina. She could not tell Deborah where they would be taken. It was a secret intended to protect them. “I do not wish upon even the most evil person such days as I then experienced,” Deborah wrote. Weeks passed without hearing anything about the children. “I could no longer control myself,” she said. “I began to tell myself it was my own fault.” One day, she read in the newspaper that a group of Jewish children had been discovered in a church, and she convinced herself that Louis and Regina must have been among them. “I thought there was no longer any point in living,” she

wrote. “I did not have my husband, and I had sent my children away myself. I turned up the gas jet.” Then she laid atop her bed. Crying into her pillow, she recited the *Shema*, three of the most important passages in the Torah, proclaiming the singularity of God. It’s a commandment to read the *Shema* every morning and evening. It’s a tradition for Jews to say it as their final words:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד…

She repeated it, over and over. Her crying stopped. She fell asleep.

That might have been the end if the woman from the OSE had not barged through her door. “You have a letter from your children!” she said. Deborah awoke dizzy and confused. The woman threw open the windows, closed the gas, and dragged Deborah outside. She snapped her out of her daze and read her the letter: “Dear Mother: We are with good people. Don’t worry, and see to it that you keep well. Many kisses.”

“That returned my courage to go on living,” Deborah wrote. The authorities hadn’t forgotten about her, though. Dr. Thierry had kept them at bay for a couple of months with a medical certificate stating that she was too ill to travel. But by mid-October, the prefect was losing his patience. He sent a letter to the commissaire to check on her status: “I would appreciate it if you could inform me whether the individual is currently transportable. If not, please ask her to send me a new medical certificate.”

It wasn’t safe to stay in Cauterets much longer, and she needed to find a way out. Deborah confided in her landlady, Madame Cazenave, who offered Deborah the key to another house she owned in Maubourguet, in the countryside 25 kilometers north of Tarbes. The problem was getting there: A new law forbade Jews from leaving their town of residence without authorization. Another note from Dr. Thierry might have pushed Deborah’s luck; the police were already dubious. But Cazenave was good friends with another doctor, a fascist well-known to the police. She managed to convince him to write a statement claiming that Deborah needed to go to Tarbes for X-rays. Since the police trusted this other doctor, they had no problem issuing Deborah a *laissez-passer*, an official document granting her permission to travel. There was just one caveat: another new law required them to stamp *Juif* in red on her identity card, so any officer who stopped her would know that she was a Jew.

Deborah gave Dr. Thierry some things for safekeeping and left for Tarbes. That was as far as her *laissez-passer* allowed her to travel, and she couldn't risk taking public transportation the rest of the way to Maubourguet. So, from Tarbes, she walked all day to reach her landlady's house and fell flat onto the bed as soon as she got there.

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Louis and Regina were 70 kilometers east in Toulouse, placed into the care of the Amsellem family, a Sephardic Jewish couple with two daughters about Louis' age. They were French, so they weren't at risk of deportation, at least for now. The Vichy government did not intend to denaturalize its own citizens, even Jewish ones.

The Amsellems were highly regarded by the OSE, and they welcomed Louis and Regina into their family with love. But it was a confusing time for Louis, now almost 9, not knowing where his parents were, suddenly given new ones in a new city, told that he could not reveal the truth of how he had gotten there. The Amsellems tried to comfort him, to reassure him that his mother was all right. "I believed everything, and I believed nothing. I felt everything, and I felt nothing," Louis said. "Whatever you told me, it was fine. Whatever you said, I did. I started to cease being myself, being a person."

In October, the OSE prepared to evacuate Louis and Regina to the United States. The U.S. State Department had just offered entry to 5,000 Jewish children living in France, and Joseph's brothers could have taken in their nephew and niece. The children received medical exams, and paperwork was completed to request their emigration. But the Vichy government wouldn't issue the required exit visas. Germany insisted that France avoid negative publicity abroad, which was expected from so many children fleeing to the United States. Historians Marrus and Paxton suspect the matter wasn't "worth a quarrel with the Germans," and that France may have wanted to use the 5,000 children to meet Germany's deportation demands without having to round up its own citizens. The Nazis had been unimpressed by the August roundups in the Unoccupied Zone, and they were pressuring Vichy officials to start adding French Jews to the trains going east if they couldn't otherwise fill them.

Everything changed after American and British forces arrived in French-controlled North Africa on Nov. 8, 1942. French troops in Morocco and Algeria quickly surrendered and joined the

Allies, prompting Germany to take over the south of France. This would put Jews in the previously unoccupied region in even greater danger. But deportations from France actually stopped for a few months owing to a shortage of trains, which were needed to transport German soldiers for a Christmas leave. Deborah remained unbothered in Maubourguet through this interlude. She knew some other refugees there, and time spent socializing with them kept her mind off her missing husband and absent children.

The roundups recommenced in February 1943, and now the Nazis could arrest Jews in the south without going through Vichy police. Just under 50,000 Jews had been deported from France so far. With about 270,000 remaining, the Nazis hoped to increase the pace of deportations to upward of 10,000 a week. Deborah could not risk staying in southern France any longer.

It is almost a footnote in the war that Italy, allied with Germany, had occupied a narrow strip of France along the Alps, from Lake Geneva to the Mediterranean, including Nice. Despite the coalition of the Axis powers, Italy's fascist leader, Benito Mussolini, did not share Hitler's hatred of Jews. He had worked alongside Jewish politicians and even had a Jewish mistress. Antisemitism wasn't widespread in Italy, where the small Jewish population was assimilated into Italian society. Without a motive to deport Jews from Italian territory, and not wanting to be perceived as Hitler's marionette, Mussolini refused to obey the Nazis' demands to hand them over. Thus, thousands of Jews living in France fled to the new Italian Zone in 1943, Deborah among them.

She walked for three days, nearly 50 kilometers, from Maubourguet to Bagnères-de-Bigorre to get a new *laissez-passer*. She had heard the commissaire there treated Jews well, even though he'd had Joseph arrested for buying milk. In fact, he'd warned at least one Jewish family before his policemen searched their house, allowing them to hide. Deborah thought he would be her best chance to receive safe passage. When she arrived in Bagnères-de-Bigorre, she reconnected with friends who were still there, and they connected her to a Jewish woman who was well-acquainted with the commissaire and would help Deborah persuade him.

When she pleaded her case to him, he said, "I am risking my life, but I'll do it for you." Then he handed Deborah her *laissez-passer* and wished her luck.

She ran straight to the train station and departed for Nice. Along the way, she watched as police pulled Jews from the train. Somehow, she made it 600 kilometers across southern France without being asked for her papers. She stepped off the train onto Italian soil, and finally, she was safe.

Past and Present

From Belgium, I flew to Toulouse, rented a car, and proceeded to reenact three years in three days. I stopped by the quiet alleyway where Louis and Regina lived with the Amsellems, then drove the highway to Bagnères-de-Luchon, Bagnères-de-Bigorre, and Cauterets. Seeing these places made the writing come easier. I could imagine my family walking down the streets. I could gaze upon the same peaks they saw.

Although I'd come to reconstruct the past, my mind was often in the present. France was shifting hard right in 2024. The world was stunned, just over a month before my trip, by the results of the July elections, for the fact that France's center and left had managed to narrowly beat the far-right, anti-immigrant National Rally party. It was widely predicted that the National Rally would win. But it still performed well, with no other party close to a majority. Roger Cohen, Paris bureau chief for the *New York Times*, wrote, "Even with fewer seats than predicted, the National Rally has now assumed a place in French politics that erased a postwar political landscape built around the idea that the far right's history of overt racism and antisemitism made it unworthy of positions of power."

Much of Europe is moving in this direction. While I was in France, the Alternative for Germany, in Thuringia, led by the Nazi apologist Björn Höcke, became the first far-right party to win a state election in Germany since World War II. This news felt personal. My grandmother was born in Germany and denaturalized by the Nazis, a fact that gave me the right to reclaim German citizenship many years later. I did so despite mixed feelings. I resented Germany for its past, but I felt better about the future there than in the United States. I sent in my renaturalization application at the height of Donald Trump's first presidency. It was before America's foremost scholars on fascism, Robert Paxton among them, would label him as such, but I recognized enough cornerstones of fascism to anticipate where he was heading. I thought Germany could be my backup plan. It seemed more stable, more tolerant. (Paxton later wrote in *Newsweek*,

after the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection, that Trump's encouragement of violence to try to overturn an election made using the fascist label "not just acceptable but necessary.")

The issue at the center of the new far-right movements has been immigration, as millions of people have fled violence in Syria, West Africa, Central America, and elsewhere to Europe and the United States in recent years. The same fears France had in 1940 are relevant today. The far-right Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni vowed to curb illegal immigration and build new migrant detention centers. The Alternative for Germany attacked former German leadership for welcoming 1.5 million refugees between 2015 and 2016. Trump—who according to *The Atlantic* has made comments like "I need the kind of generals that Hitler had"—promised "the largest deportation operation in the history of our country," and his supporters waved signs that said "Mass Deportation Now" at the 2024 Republican National Convention. Notwithstanding the cruelty of it, many economists say such a large-scale deportation would be disastrous. Construction companies would struggle to fill the jobs held by undocumented workers. The government would suddenly stop receiving billions of dollars in Social Security and Medicare taxes paid by immigrants who don't even qualify for the benefits. What far-right voters seem to be forgetting from history, besides the innocent people murdered in the Holocaust, is that the same nationalistic and xenophobic ideologies only led to Germany's downfall. They're not ingredients for a thriving democracy.

France's teetering toward the far right made me uncomfortable telling people why I was there. If a hotel receptionist asked, I offered something vague about working for an outdoor magazine; this didn't raise further questions in the Pyrénées, where skiing, hiking, mountain biking, and paragliding are as standard as bread and cheese. It seemed risky to reveal too much to a stranger, especially one with a key to my room, who might enjoy listening to the kind of podcast that informs Holocaust deniers. In case that sounds dramatic, I'll note that, during my trip, former Fox News host Tucker Carlson released a podcast with a Holocaust revisionist—whom Carlson called "the best and most honest popular historian in the United States"—who argued that British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was the "chief villain" of World War II, not Hitler, and that the Holocaust was an accident, not a genocide. Millions of people listened.

Thus, I spent my days in France self-contained. I preferred it that way. It gave me space to think and gird myself for where I was going next. I kept thinking about Beila. I could not imagine that Deborah did not think about her sister every day in France. I could not imagine that they never

wrote to each other. I could not imagine that Deborah never learned that on March 8, 1942, Beila gave birth to her second daughter, Rosa. I wondered when Deborah first assumed the worst. It was late October 1942 when the underground press in France began reporting rumors that women, children, and anyone elderly or ill were being asphyxiated by poison gas—rumors dismissed by much of the world as too absurd.

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It took about two weeks for the Belgian army to surrender to Germany in May 1940. Soon the Nazis revoked civil rights and seized property from the Jews that lived there. Come 1942, Jews in Belgium were required to wear a yellow Star of David sewn onto their clothes. Some were rounded up for forced labor, including Beila's husband, Wolf.

In August, notices were distributed requiring the Jews of Belgium to report to the Dossin barracks, a transit camp in Mechelen, south of Antwerp, on the pretext that they would be brought to Germany for labor service. The notices warned that failure to comply "could have grave consequences for members of your family or for the entire Jewish community." Thousands of Jews obeyed. Those who ignored the notices but didn't go into hiding were soon arrested and taken to the barracks anyway. It's most likely, based on timing, that Beila was arrested in September, during one of the several raids on Antwerp conducted by German authorities with help from local police.

Dossin was a square five-story building with a large courtyard. The Jews who arrived there had their belongings confiscated and were assigned to dirty, overcrowded rooms. There they waited, sometimes for days, weeks, or months, before they were added to a list, packed onto a train, and shipped to Auschwitz, the Nazis' largest concentration camp and killing center. Nobody was told that was where they'd be going, not that any of them knew Auschwitz existed.

Early on Oct. 10, 1942, Transport XII left in sealed passenger cars carrying 1,681 people. Three of them were Beila and her daughters, 5-year-old Rachel and 6-month-old Rosa. For two days, the train crossed Belgium and Germany before reaching Auschwitz in southern Poland. When the doors opened, the Jews were greeted by barking German shepherds and guards shouting slurs and commands. Those the Nazis deemed fit enough—only about a third—were pulled aside for forced labor. Everyone else, including 452 children under age 15, was led into the

forest on the outskirts of the camp, where there were two farmhouses, one red brick, one plastered white, formerly owned by expelled Poles. Each could fit about 1,000 people squeezed together. In either one, their fates were the same. They were told to undress for a shower, then pushed into a dark room. The door was shut and boarded up behind them. Pellets of Zyklon B were poured in through a hatch. The victims climbed over each other, gasping and screaming until their last breaths. When it was done, Jewish prisoners had to drag the corpses to burn pits outside. Beila, Rachel, Rosa, and all the other bodies were thrown onto a pile of scrap wood and burned. Whatever ashes and bones remained were shoveled into wagons and dumped into the Vistula River.

Wolf was not far behind them. He had been called up in early summer to work for Organisation Todt, a Nazi construction battalion that used slave labor to build military fortifications in northern France. In late October, 1,315 men selected from Organisation Todt, including Wolf, were loaded onto a train to Auschwitz, with a stop to pick up 622 more Jews from the Dossin barracks. By some stroke of luck, 244 victims escaped the train en route. Of the 1,693 that disembarked at Auschwitz on Nov. 3, more than half were immediately gassed. It's not clear whether Wolf was sent to the gas chambers or sent to work first. Either way, he did not leave Auschwitz alive.

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I woke up in a rainy Cauterets on my third day in France and drove up Charles Thierry Avenue, a beautiful road carved into the side of a mountain, toward Pont d'Espagne, in Pyrénées National Park, where I hiked past groups of tourists gaping at thunderous waterfalls pouring into the canyon below us.

Dr. Thierry saved the lives of my great-grandmother, my great-aunt, and my grandfather. I wouldn't be alive without him. He became mayor of Cauterets in 1956, served until 1969, and was instrumental in developing the town's renowned winter-sports resort. He died in 1973 at 86 years old. I don't think anyone knew anything about the story of Deborah Schneider when they named a road after him. No matter the reason, I'm glad that his name has not been forgotten. I only wish for everyone who drives up his road to see the virtue in standing up to fascism.

From Cauterets, I drove two hours to Gurs, a rural town in the foothills, following roughly the route Joseph went as he was being deported. He had been told in June 1942 that he was required to join a GTE. What he did not know was that France was now using the Groups of Foreign Workers to gather Jews together for deportation. On Aug. 26, Joseph was taken to a large detention camp in Gurs, where he slept in crude wooden barracks among prisoners dying from starvation, dysentery, and typhoid fever. Eighty-two years later, his great-grandson parked in the small gravel lot at the memorial there. I got out of my car and immediately stepped in dog shit.

The Gurs memorial is in a quiet field with mountain views and forest all around. The barbed wire and barracks are long gone. I'd planned to take a moment to allow whatever thoughts and feelings came. Instead, I was fixated on scraping the shit off my sneaker. No grass, no stick, no puddle would extract it from all the crannies in the tread. I started down a path to the cemetery, dragging my foot through the dirt along the way. And even when the scent had dissipated, I remained obsessed with whatever microbes remained on my sole. I stood outside the cemetery gate, grinding my foot into the earth, stomping, kicking until I started to sweat and the absurdity finally occurred to me. I took a deep breath and composed myself. I opened the gate.

Only a few other people were there, and they were leaving as I was entering. We exchanged polite *bonjours*, then I was all alone in the cemetery. Nearly 22,000 prisoners passed through Gurs. More than 1,100 died in the camp. This cemetery was where they were laid to rest. I walked down the rows of headstones. I read their names, when they were born, the year they died, where they came from. The uniformity of the numbers told a story of catastrophe. Pick a row and read the years of death: 1940, 1940, 1940, 1940… Pick another: 1941, 1941, 1941… I knelt before two newborns' graves: Gerd-Arthur Bernsteim, 1942–1942, Gurs; Charles Duculo, 1943–1943, Gurs. Born and died in this hell. I opened my notes. I came to this place as a writer hoping to conjure up something somewhat profound. But I could not. "This is fucked up" was what I wrote down. What else is there to say? Why search for any more-complicated meaning, why try to say anything new, when there are still so many people who deny the simple fact that an atrocity happened there?

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On Sept. 1, 1942, Joseph and 500 other Jews in the camp were trucked from Gurs to a nearby train station, then locked in dark cattle cars bound for Drancy, an unfinished apartment building in the suburbs of Paris serving as a transit camp for deportees from France. They traveled for nearly 32 hours sitting on urine-soaked straw, picking up hundreds more Jews from camps along the way. When they reached Drancy, they were given one blanket each and placed into rooms with straw to sleep on. The conditions were so unsanitary, the cabbage soup they were fed was so inadequate, that 950 inmates died at Drancy in the first 10 months it was in operation. Joseph had been there for hardly two days when he was put onto another train with some 1,000 other Jews. Only 27 of them would survive to see the end of the war.

The prisoners did not know where they were going as they rode east to the German border, where the French gendarmes guarding the train passed their duties on to Nazi police. At several stops, the guards would open the cars, drag out whoever had died from a heart attack or heatstroke, then lock the doors again. Finally, two days after departing from Drancy, Joseph was called off the train.

He wasn't in Auschwitz. The train had stopped 80 kilometers short, in Cosel, Upper Silesia. Almost every able-bodied man was taken away for forced labor. Everyone else on board continued to Auschwitz, where all but 16 men and 38 women were gassed upon arrival. Joseph would spend the next year in nearby work camps—first Tarnowitz, then Schöppinitz—where prisoners laid train tracks with their bare hands, even in the winter months when their skin stuck to the rails.

Another Piece of Bread

When Deborah arrived in Italian-occupied Nice in the spring of 1943, she found a world unlike anywhere she had been in years. Jews walked unafraid in the streets. Italian police even stood guard outside the synagogue to protect the Jews inside. There was a refugee center where Deborah could have received financial aid and help finding lodging and food. Grateful for their haven, the Jews of Nice raised 3 million francs for Italian victims of Allied bombings.

But the Germans resented this "Promised Land for the Jews in France," as the high-ranking Nazi Heinz Röthke disapprovingly called it. To conciliate their Axis partners, Italian officials began working alongside the Jewish aid committee in Nice to spread out the Jewish population

and make it seem a little less obvious. Several weeks after arriving, Deborah boarded a bus hired by the committee and left for Haute-Savoie, a region on the opposite end of the Italian Zone. There, on the slopes of Mont Blanc, were ski areas with lodgings unused during the wartime summer. The area was also protected from German soldiers by the Swiss border, which covered the north, northwest, and east.

Deborah settled into Saint-Gervais-les-Bains, a resort village high on the valleyside near Chamonix. About 850 Jews were there with her, all accommodated in various hotels, boardinghouses, and chalets. A new community emerged, as the Holocaust researcher Nancy Lefenfeld describes in her book *The Fate of Others: Rescuing Jewish Children on the French-Swiss Border*. They established a synagogue and elected a committee, which received funds from the Federation of Jewish Societies of France to support those in need. They set up dining halls, where refugees went to socialize over soup. But Deborah didn't spend much time mingling. She was assigned to a tiny house in the woods, a steep 40-minute walk from the center of town. There was one small room with an iron bed and a little stove, no table or chair, and she quickly got to work pulling down spiderwebs and cleaning every corner. She needed it to be perfect for her children.

The OSE had representatives assisting the refugees in Saint-Gervais, so Deborah was able to find someone to escort Louis and Regina from Toulouse, where it was no longer safe for them to stay. "The thought that my children were being brought made me so happy. No person could be any happier," Deborah wrote. But she worried she wouldn't have enough food for them. There were the dining halls, but it wouldn't be easy to walk all the way there twice a day with two kids, now 9 and 5 years old. So she went over to some farmers she saw working in a field near her house and asked them if she could work for them.

They looked at her skeptically. "What kind of work can you do?" one woman asked her.

"The same things you are doing," Deborah said. Without hesitating, she took off her shoes so the soil wouldn't stick to them and started doing what she'd learned as a child in the fields with her mother in Lipsko.

At noon, the woman made Deborah lunch and brought up the matter of payment. “I explained to her that I did not want any money, only provisions, since I had two children,” Deborah wrote. That evening, she went home with a half-loaf of bread, three eggs, and a large piece of cheese.

When the day came, Deborah walked 2 kilometers down the steep road to the train station on the valley floor. Louis jumped straight into her arms and kissed her. She put Regina on her back and took her son by the hand and walked them back up to her little refuge. Deborah was hardly able to breathe by the time she opened the door. As she bathed her children for the first time in 10 months, she felt a renewed strength and courage that she had almost forgotten she’d had within her. She gave them a glass of milk and the bread and cheese she had worked for, and when they finished it, they looked at her pitifully, and Louis said, “May I have another piece of bread?”

“Eat as much as you like,” Deborah said. And the children danced.

That night, they all slept together in the iron bed, Louis and Regina’s arms wrapped around their mother. Deborah could hardly sleep. She kept waking herself up to make sure it was real and not just a dream.

Deborah enjoyed the peaceful rhythm of her new life, waking up early every morning to prepare breakfast for her children, working in the fields until noon, coming home to make them lunch, then going back to the fields until nightfall. After the children ate their dinner and went to bed, Deborah would sit beside a little lamp, knitting stockings to earn some money. On Sunday, she’d take the day off from the farm and bring Louis and Regina into the woods to collect firewood, which she’d chop and the children would stack. Life was simple, and it was good.

The early summer of 1943 was good for all of the refugees in Saint-Gervais. They no longer lived under the shadow of hate. Not even the few thousand Saint-Gervais locals seemed to mind the hundreds of foreigners suddenly appearing in their town. The refugee community was filled with warm and dependable people. Several women volunteered to teach children who’d fallen behind in school during all the moving and hiding. Tailors helped repair worn-out clothes. Almost all the young men and women joined the *Mouvement de Jeunesse Sioniste*, or MJS, a barely year-old Zionist youth movement that set about recruiting in Saint-Gervais. They planted

gardens to keep the kitchens stocked, and they served however they would be helpful. Soon, they would be needed for something far greater.

The sanctuary of the Italian Zone would not last after the Allies invaded Sicily in July. The Fascist Grand Council issued a vote of no confidence in Mussolini, leading to his arrest and replacement by Marshal Pietro Badoglio. With the Allies in Sicily positioned for an invasion of the mainland, Italy began withdrawing from much of the territory it had occupied in France. The plan was to keep only a tiny slice. Nice would remain under Italian control, but Saint-Gervais would likely fall into German hands.

Some refugees could find safety in neutral Switzerland, if only they could get in. The problem wasn't so much the illegality of crossing the border; just reaching it in the vicinity of Saint-Gervais would involve difficult mountaineering. To reach a flatter point, they would have to travel about 60 kilometers across the evaporating Italian Zone, just as German troops were moving in. The dangers were well understood, but, in mid-August, the MJS began smuggling children, and some parents with their very young children, from Saint-Gervais into Switzerland.

Around noon on Aug. 30, Deborah, Louis, Regina, and three other mothers and four other children walked down to the station. They took the train to Thonon-les-Bains, on the shore of Lake Geneva, then the bus to Douvaine to meet their two smugglers, likely locals hired by the MJS, whose real identities were kept a secret. Deborah tied a gag around Regina's mouth. From Douvaine, it was an hour walk through gently rolling fields and dense woods to the Hermance River. They would just have to get past some barbed wire, run through some shallow water, then climb up the riverbank, and they would be in Switzerland.

They came so close to freedom that night. The wire was a few meters away. Suddenly, someone was shooting at them. They dropped to the ground and screamed in surrender. They'd been caught by Italian soldiers. The next morning, they were handed over to French officials, who ordered them to return to Saint-Gervais.

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On Sept. 2, 2024, I went to the Hermance River to take those steps that my grandfather couldn't. The border was open now; there was no barbed wire. I would only need to walk over a

bridge. But I wouldn't go that easy way. I spent an hour just wandering the trails that I imagined Deborah, Louis, and Regina had been on, past fields of soybeans and dead sunflowers.

There's now a memorial on a farm a little upstream dedicated to the anonymous rescuers who smuggled refugees across. It has four stone tablets placed in pairs and footsteps impressed on a short, winding path between them. I walked in each step, then continued down a narrow gravel road around a pasture with horses grazing before I found a faint trail leading through some trees back to the river. It was shallow, it moved slowly, but the wall of roots and dirt on the other side was the work of mighty erosion.

I tiptoed across, from one rock to the next, to avoid submerging my sneakers. A golden late-afternoon light came through the leafy canopy above and glittered off the bubbling water. I grabbed on to some roots and pulled myself up a few big steps into Switzerland. I looked back across the river into France. Why the Italians couldn't have looked away and let those mothers and children go, I could not understand.

I found a trail and took it to the road. My phone had died, so I started walking, following signs to the town of Hermance, where I knew I could get a bus to my hotel in Geneva. It was somewhere along this road, not far from where I was walking, that Swiss customs officers arrested 15 children from an MJS convoy who'd crossed the border late on Aug. 28, 1943, two days before Deborah's group made their attempt. Those arrests were of no consequence. I'm certain that my family had planned to be arrested by Swiss officials if they got to the other side of the border, knowing that children and parents with children younger than 6 were granted protection after entering illegally. But that doesn't negate the fact that tens of thousands of Jewish adults who crossed the Swiss border during the war were sent back to where they'd come from. One could only guess how many lives would have been saved if legal immigration were possible.

Walking that quiet country road, I thought about the migrants trying to cross into the United States through Mexico. They've been called illegal aliens, violent criminals, not people, animals, and terrorists by right-wing politicians eliciting fear of a baseless migrant-driven crime wave. Similar language was used to describe Jewish refugees in the 1940s. But anyone who helped Jews immigrate illegally is now remembered as a hero on monuments and in films. It's hard to imagine a future in which we look back and say what a good thing we did locking migrants in

cages and deporting them in historic numbers. I wondered why some people honor the righteous from the past if they don't hope for their own legacies to be righteous as well.

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Back in Saint-Gervais, the first week of September 1943, the Jewish committee was preparing to evacuate everyone to Nice, which was supposed to remain under Italian occupation. Deborah was holed up in her house with her children following their close call at the Swiss border, and she almost missed the announcement to pack her bags. But one morning, she woke up with the feeling that she should go to the committee headquarters to see if there was any news. And the news was bad. "The Germans had already come and we had to flee," she wrote. "I hurried home at once, took the children, and went back to the committee. Whatever everyone else would do, I would do."

The committee and the Italian army requisitioned a fleet of trucks and a train with five passenger cars for the evacuation. Since anyone riding in the back of the trucks would have to endure a day of mountain roads, about 240 refugees who were elderly or disabled or had young children could take the train, which would have to navigate a circuitous track west for 100 kilometers before turning back east, continuing into Italy, through Turin, south, and then back across the French border to Nice. On Sept. 8, the train departed Saint-Gervais with Deborah, Louis, and Regina on board.

The train dragged on slowly amid the geopolitical upheaval, getting held up at different stations for long stretches of time, and it took two days to reach the Italian border at Modane. It was hot, and there was little to eat or drink. Regina was so thirsty that Deborah wiped saliva from her own mouth and fed it to her daughter. Eventually, the train descended the Alps toward Turin. But at some point, the passengers received word of Italy's surprising change of sides and the ensuing blowback.

Badoglio, Italy's new prime minister, had thus far publicly affirmed his commitment to the Axis. Privately, he had been negotiating with the Allies. Italy's surrender was announced at 6:30 p.m. on Sept. 8, not long into the train's journey. The German response was an immediate invasion of northern and central Italy and the entirety of the Italian Zone in France, Nice included. The

thousands of Jews trapped in Nice were about to experience what authors Marrus and Paxton called “one of the most brutal manhunts in Western Europe during World War II.”

The passengers on the train panicked once they learned that Germans would be waiting for them in Nice. It was the middle of the night when they pulled into the station in Turin. Some people ran out, hoping to get on a train to Rome. In a 1998 Shoah Foundation testimony, the survivor Bernard Ehrenberg recalled his father and several men grabbing their luggage and trying to leave, but officials pushing them back into the train and locking the doors. Deborah watched as others who’d jumped out of windows were beaten by *carabinieri* on the platform.

The train continued south through rural Piedmont, and Deborah knew that she was running out of time to escape. She went to one of the doors and, seeing that it hadn’t been locked, pulled it open. A cool blast rushed into the car. “She’s crazy!” people were shouting. The train slowed down as it approached another station. Deborah picked up Louis in one arm and Regina in the other—and jumped.

“I Can Work”

Joseph was in the Schöppinitz labor camp building railroads in Upper Silesia. Even though men died there every day from the grueling work, the prisoners started to hear the rumors of someplace worse, a place called Auschwitz, where Jews were killed with gas. They watched the cattle cars pass by and heard the passengers’ desperate cries for water. But they couldn’t try to help without getting shot.

Their day came on Nov. 3, 1943. The Nazis had begun liquidating many of the labor camps in Upper Silesia, intending to merge them into the Auschwitz complex. All of the rail workers and the women who worked in the kitchen in Schöppinitz were put in sealed freight cars for the 45-minute ride.

It was exactly one year since Joseph’s brother-in-law, Wolf, had been delivered to this place in hell, and Auschwitz had since undergone an expansion. There were now dozens of satellite camps for specialized labor, everything from sewing to weapons manufacturing. Four new gas chambers had been built, each large enough to fit 2,000 people at a time, with attached crematoria capable of burning more than 4,400 corpses per day in furnaces.

There were 1,203 Jews on the train from Schöppinitz to Auschwitz that cold November night. The doors opened to a chaotic scene. Soldiers shouted at everyone to get out, and they swung sticks at the prisoners, forcing them into a line in front of infamous Nazi physician Josef Mengele, known as the “Angel of Death.” Mengele used Auschwitz prisoners for inhumane and usually lethal medical experiments. He was also in charge of selections when new prisoners arrived. If he thought their bodies could be useful, he would motion for them to go one way; if not, he would point them to the gas chambers. Mengele condemned 896 of the Jews that had come from Schöppinitz, sparing just 284 men and 23 women for labor.

Those not being gassed were marched into a building for registration. They had worn their own clothes affixed with a Star of David badge at Schöppinitz, but those were taken so that anything of value could be sent to Germany. Their hair was shaved, and they were sprayed down with cold water. The prisoners could hardly recognize each other as they stood there shivering, naked and bald. They were given thin, dirty, patched-up uniforms—essentially, striped pajamas—and old shoes, many pairs made of wood. Their names were replaced with numbers, assigned in order of arrival and tattooed on their left forearms. Joseph was near the back of the line, number 160606.

Joseph would not write his story, nor would he ever share it publicly. He would withhold most details anytime he told his family about the camps. I’ll never know exactly what he felt each day. I’ll never know the worst of what he saw. But records from concentration camps preserve portions of his story, including where he was put to work and with whom. Reading and listening to dozens of testimonies from people who survived with him was enough for me to understand why he wouldn’t have wanted me to know more. “In this camp, it was said, you come in through the gate and go out through the chimney,” wrote George Preston, number 160581, in a letter to his uncle after he was liberated in 1945.

There was an awful burning smell in Auschwitz. “Somehow, we knew right away that was the smell of the bodies,” said Jack Kowal, number 160515, in a 1998 Shoah Foundation testimony. Although they had avoided the gas chambers, Kowal and the other new prisoners were told by more experienced ones not to expect to live much longer. Starvation, disease, and short-tempered guards were merciless killers. Nazi soldiers would set their German shepherds on prisoners, and the dogs would tear victims’ flesh from their bones. Joseph later told my

father, with genuine fear in his eyes, that those dogs scared him more than anything in Auschwitz.

Joseph and everyone else from Schöppinitz spent their first several weeks in Auschwitz in quarantine, where many of them died from typhus. They were crowded into bunks, practically sleeping on top of each other. For food, they got one bowl of a smelly, watery potato soup for lunch, which many struggled to stomach, and a little bit of black bread for dinner, part of which they were supposed to save for breakfast the next day. Jack Pinto, 160572, would recall a night when he realized the man lying next to him had died; he went through the dead man's pockets, where he found some leftover bread. "What do you do? You take that piece of bread. You couldn't help it," he said in a 1995 Shoah Foundation testimony. By the end of the quarantine, Preston estimated in his letter, less than a third of them were still alive.

One day, Mengele came into the barracks for another round of selections. Whoever was left would be assigned work. No job in Auschwitz was good, but some jobs weren't as bad as others. An indoor job was the best anyone could hope for. A favored position involved donning a gas mask to disinfect lice-ridden uniforms using Zyklon B, the same poison used in the gas chambers. Outdoor jobs, like forestry, left the malnourished and underdressed prisoners exposed to freezing temperatures and snow through the harsh Polish winters. But there was one job more physically taxing than any other. Working in the Jawischowitz coal mine meant long days crawling through dark, damp, cramped tunnels, shoveling coal onto conveyor belts and praying not to get buried by a cave-in. That's where Mengele sent Joseph.

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Jawischowitz was a sub-camp of Auschwitz, located about 9 kilometers away, where the Nazis had taken control of what was considered one of the most advanced coal mines in the industry when it was constructed in the 1930s. There were about 70 guards for about 2,000 prisoners, all male, some of them boys as young as 12. Early every morning, they were woken from their barracks to gather by a lamppost in the camp square for roll call—called by number, not name. It could go on for hours if someone wasn't accounted for, even on the coldest days. Anyone caught wearing an extra layer, such as a piece of blanket under his uniform, was punished with 25 lashes on his back.

The food was slightly better than it was in Auschwitz, but still “not fit for pigs,” the survivor George Rosenthal told an interviewer in 1997. Breakfast was a piece of bread and a cup of warm black water that everyone called “coffee,” but no one was quite sure what it actually was. On occasion, they got a small piece of meat or cheese—“cheese that I wouldn’t stand near now, but we ate it, and it was delicious,” Rosenthal said. After work, for dinner, they got another piece of bread and a bowl of soup with something like turnips in it.

The coal mine was several hundred meters deep, accessed by a high-speed elevator that would hurl a man’s intestines into his throat. Beneath a massive steel winding tower was a multilevel labyrinth connecting two shafts about 2 kilometers apart. Many areas were so tight that prisoners lost the skin on their knees and backs while working on all fours. The mine operated 24 hours a day, with prisoners working by lamplight in eight-hour shifts, not including the time it took to march the 2 kilometers between the camp and the mine shaft. Each person had to blast and shovel a certain amount of coal by the end of their shift. If anyone came up short, he would have to stay for the entirety of the next shift, even if he needed only an extra hour to finish.

One advantage to Jawischowitz over the main Auschwitz camp—a big advantage—was cleanliness. Because prisoners left the mine covered in coal dust, they got daily showers and a second, clean uniform to wear at camp. This kept lice and the diseases they carried under control, which improved survival rates. But thousands of Jews in Jawischowitz died in other ways. The work was dangerous and exhausting, especially on such little food. Injuries were frequent, and prisoners who were too hurt to continue working were transferred to the crematoria and replaced by incoming transports. Every couple of weeks, a doctor from Auschwitz, usually Horst Fischer, came to Jawischowitz to do selections. He took the most emaciated prisoners and anyone who had been in the camp infirmary for longer than a week or two, loaded them onto a truck, and drove them to the gas chambers. By then, there was no doubt about what would happen to the people Fischer took away. “Those who were loaded on the trucks knew where they were going; those of us who watched it knew where they were going,” Rosenthal said. Many prisoners who couldn’t wait to be freed from their misery killed themselves by running into the high-voltage electric fence that surrounded the camp.

One death in particular left a profound impression on the prisoners. It came up, with much emotion, in almost every Jawischowitz survivor testimony I listened to. One day, in the spring of 1944, there was an air raid, and the power went out in the camp. Abraham Katz, a Polish Jew

about 19 years old, climbed the fence while the electricity was off. He was caught after several weeks on the run and brought back to the camp to be hanged while all of the prisoners were forced to watch. Katz did not exhibit the slightest fear as the rope was put around his neck. Stay strong, he told the crowd, the war is nearly won."

I can only assume that Joseph had similar experiences in Jawischowitz. There was just one personal story that he would tell his family about a close call he had with selections. At some point, his little toe was severed from his right foot. The exact circumstances aren't clear, but, according to his daughter, Regina, and granddaughter, Shelley, he said a guard intentionally ran it over with a wheelbarrow. He was recovering when a doctor came to clear out the infirmary. When he was selected, he got out of his bed, jumped up and down on his bandaged foot, and shouted, *Ich kann arbeiten! Ich kann arbeiten!* ("I can work!") He was allowed to return to the mine without any more time to heal. Visions of one day reuniting with his wife and children kept him fighting to stay alive.

The Garden of Saint Dominic

Two policemen found Deborah and the children on the side of the tracks. They had landed in Fossano, an old town in northwestern Italy. Louis and Regina were all right, but Deborah was bleeding and couldn't stand. The officers carried her to their station, then called the hospital. It was almost 2 a.m., but Dr. Francesco Costanzi came right away.

Dr. Costanzi was the director and chief physician of the Ospedale Maggiore of Fossano. A handsome 42-year-old man with slicked-back hair and a sense of humor, he was a beloved local figure—known in Fossano as *Il Medico dei Poveri*, "The Doctor of the Poor," because he provided free care for anyone experiencing financial hardship and often folded some cash into his prescription forms to pay for his patients' medications. He'd taken residence on the top floor of the brick hospital building to be available for any emergency at any hour.

Dr. Costanzi arrived at the police station and found Deborah badly injured. She needed to be taken to the hospital. The question was what to do with the children. Deborah didn't speak Italian and was having trouble communicating with the officers, but she understood that they didn't want Louis and Regina to go with her.

She could not predict whose side anyone was on or what they would do with her children. Maybe if she told them the truth, they would offer protection. More likely, they would turn Deborah, Louis, and Regina over to the Germans. If they didn't, they would be risking their own executions, since the Nazis made aiding a Jew a capital offense. But Deborah took a chance with the doctor.

"Do you understand French?" she asked him.

He did, and Deborah pleaded with him to save her children.

When a police officer asked Dr. Costanzi what she was saying, he told them, "She is asking that I take along the children so they can stand beside the bed where she will die." He guaranteed that, after her death, he would bring the children back.

All three were brought to the hospital and put into two beds beside each other for the night. The next day, several physicians came to examine Deborah and determined she would need surgery. Then all the doctors except Dr. Costanzi left the room, and Deborah told him about what they'd gone through and what was at stake. She asked him to help her hide Louis and Regina, and he promised that he would.

Whenever there was trouble in Fossano, the one institution the people could turn to was the Catholic Church. Dionisio Borra, the newly appointed bishop of Fossano, had arrived by train only a few weeks earlier, on Aug. 22, 1943. He had been a priest and seminary professor in Ivrea, north of Turin. Suddenly, he was thrust into this high position just as Italy was at its most volatile. The Allies were in Sicily, Mussolini had just fallen from power, and the nation was on the brink of civil war. Aug. 22 "should have been a day of great celebration and joy," wrote the bishop's secretary, a young priest named Rinaldo Avetta, in his private notes. Instead, he described a sadness lingering over the festivities like a thick fog no one could clear from their minds.

Then came Sept. 8, the announcement of Italy's armistice with the Allies. "It was not the end of the war but the beginning of total chaos," wrote Avetta, who was also Monsignor Borra's longtime friend from Ivrea and a former student at the seminary there. So when the state of Italy collapsed under German occupation, it was to the church that the Fossanesi went for

help—whether they needed bread or advice on which side they should fight for. “But what could you suggest?” Avetta continued. “And then…did you trust them? And what if they had been sent to sound out the orientations of the clergy? Neither the bishop nor I knew anyone to confide in.” Then another problem fell—rather, she jumped—into their diocese.

Dr. Costanzi called the head nurse, a nun who spoke French, into Deborah’s hospital room. She could be trusted, he said, and Deborah told her everything—that she’d jumped from the train and that the children needed a hiding place or else they’d likely be killed. The nurse left to consult the bishop. fThis was one matter he knew how to address: It was his religious and moral duty to be a protector.

The German military had quickly established a presence in Fossano for its location along the rail line, halfway between Turin and the coast, and many young locals joined armed resistance groups within the partisan movement. But the Sept.15 issue of *La Fedeltà*, the official newspaper of the Diocese of Fossano, encouraged citizens to obey the German authorities “to ensure the order that would otherwise be maintained by force.” Monsignor Borra’s unambiguous public stance was that civilian violence against their occupiers would selfishly endanger fellow citizens. However, mindful readers would understand the deeper meanings in his statement on “Duties of the present hour,” which he published in the paper’s next issue. He repeated the call to refrain from violence. “Let each one take his place,” he wrote. But it was apparent—even if he did not write it directly—that he believed taking one’s place did not mean surrendering to the Nazis and their hateful ideology. There were nonviolent forms of resistance that their faith required of them, acts of selflessness of higher virtue than obedience. “Act with kindness toward everyone, open his soul to feelings of Christian love, and find in prayer the sweetest of comforts,” he wrote. “God will know how to direct events, even if painful, to our greater good.”

Monsignor Borra placed his trust in Maria Angelica Ferrari, mother superior of the Istituto Suore Domenicane, a congregation of Dominican nuns. She could tell no one where the children had come from, not even the other sisters.

Deborah cried when Ferrari came to her hospital room to take Louis and Regina away. “Be a mother to my children,” she begged.

The nun cried with her. “Be at ease,” she said. “I shall bring you news of them.”

Ferrari took Regina back to the institute, where the nuns ran a primary school. Louis was handed over to someone else the bishop trusted, a 21-year-old acolyte named Antonio Cucchietti.

Cucchietti took Louis to the Convitto Civico, a Salesian secondary school for boys, where there was a dormitory used by priests, poor children, and orphans. Regina moved into a room in the Scuola San Domenico, the Dominican sisters' school. The center of Fossano was a dense neighborhood. The nunnery and its affiliated school, the Convitto Civico and its clergy housing, and Fossano's spectacular brick cathedral were all in a little cluster from which the hospital was just a five-minute walk. But Deborah, Louis, and Regina each came to occupy distant worlds—separate fictions—as they learned to blend in.

Five-year-old Regina found her place quickly. She'd come wearing a blue-and-white checkered dress and otherwise had no possessions. She had no memories from before the war. She barely knew her father. She'd never had a place to call home. She was right at the age when one's identity takes shape, when one learns who she is and where she belongs. She was given rosary beads and a black uniform with a white detachable collar. Regina became Reginetta, the nuns' "little queen." And Reginetta was a good Catholic girl.

The heavy front door of the Dominican school opened into a hall with arched ceilings and patterned glass windows. Reginetta's bedroom was on the second floor, and if she stepped out onto the balcony she could see the Madonna in the courtyard garden. Only a few girls stayed overnight at the Dominican school—for instance, if they lived too far into the countryside for daily commuting. But they would usually go home on weekends. Reginetta was a unique and constant presence in the nuns' lives, and they were constant in hers. She loved the mother superior, who gave her piano lessons, nursed her to health whenever she was sick, and prayed with her for the war to end and for her father's safe return. As she became more immersed in her new Catholic life, she started to believe that the church was her future and that she, too, would become a nun.

Things were a little harder for Louis. He had a good friend and mentor in Cucchietti, but there were practical issues he had to navigate that his sister did not. He was circumcised, so he had to be careful whenever he used the bathroom that nobody would see that he was secretly

Jewish. And it was difficult, at his age, to play a gentile role without knowing the first thing about Christian rituals, or how to speak Italian. Cucchietti told him to keep his mouth shut until he learned. But it didn't take too long for him to adapt, and soon Louis became Luigi, a good Catholic boy.

Luigi wasn't old enough to attend the secondary school at the Convitto Civico, so, each day, he went to the Dominican school with his sister. They were in separate grades, but she loved seeing him there whenever they passed each other. A little wave, even a glance from him, would give her joy. He gave her a chipped marble, which she kept in her pocket, and she would touch it throughout each day just to be sure it was still there.

They excelled in school, studying history, arithmetic, Italian language, and religion. Prayer, in Latin, was a big part of their daily lives too. It was never the bishop nor the mother superior's intentions to convert them. It was only necessary for their safety that they seemed Catholic. But they loved participating in the religion anyway. "I could almost envision the possibility of my eventually having become a Catholic, and having even become a priest," Louis told an interviewer. "I loved all the accouterments that come with Catholicism, the martyrdoms of the saints, their stories, the rituals, the pomp, the majestic aspect of it."

Luigi was a fine altar server dressed in a cassock and surplice at morning Mass. Reginetta, every night before bed, made the sign of the cross and said her prayers. She prayed for the bishop, the mother superior, her mother, her father, and her brother. Then she fell asleep imagining that they were all reunited in Paradise.

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Deborah was very ill after having undergone a grisly abdominal operation, and the doctors didn't expect her to live much longer. Monsignor Borra and Mother Ferrari came to the hospital to comfort her. He gave her last rites and told the doctors to do everything possible to save her. Whatever medicine was given, whatever prayers were spoken, whatever fate or luck she had brought her back from the verge of death once again.

It took months for Deborah to recover. When she finally left her bed, she went to the head nurse, in whom she had confided when she first arrived, and asked her for work to do in

exchange for meals and a permanent place to stay. She started working in the laundry room, down a dark maze of plastered corridors in the hospital basement, repairing torn sheets. And she assisted Dr. Costanzi with taking temperatures and giving injections. She got her own little bedroom, and in this private space, on Friday nights, she would wave her hands over a light bulb and say the Shabbos candle blessings:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל שַׁבָּת.

The medical staff at the Ospedale Maggiore enjoyed having her there, but her presence was a danger. The Nazis searched the hospital often, and she would have to be hidden. On several occasions, her rescuers arranged for a partisan to take her to a hideout in the hills.

“I filled myself more full of fear than I did of food,” she wrote. Nobody was eating well in Italy. The children, too, ate meager rations in school, which pained their mother to even think about.

The year 1944 was miserable for the people of Fossano. The town was bombed multiple times by the Allies; people were killed and buildings were destroyed, as were parts of the railroad. Monsignor Borra always visited the sites of the bombings, and he offered affected people shelter in the seminary in nearby Cussanio, where he also happened to be hiding a Jewish family from Turin. The bombing that caused him the most heartache, though, was in Centallo, 8 kilometers away, where the bishop was president of a girls’ orphanage that was destroyed by a rogue pilot on Dec. 29. Two nuns and 14 little girls died. Avetta described how deeply it affected Monsignor Borra, even after the orphanage was rebuilt, citing the Gospel of Matthew: “It is Rachel who weeps for her children and does not want to be consoled because they are no more.”

Monsignor Borra didn’t care where someone came from or what their politics were. All he sought was peace in his community, and when there was violence, he would hurry to be there to soothe or mourn. “In the bishopric, there was a coming and going of fascists and partisans, disoriented young people and desperate mothers,” Avetta said in 1966, in a speech for the bishop’s 80th birthday. “Everyone claimed to be on the side of reason; everyone had a tear to dry or a pain to soothe, and, for everyone, it was necessary to have the right word, admonishing or comforting. How many times did Monsignor Borra have to rush, on foot, by bicycle, in a carriage, in a

borrowed car, to settle a dispute, to calm an unjustified anger, to have a corpse removed from the noose, to cry over the 16 coffins of his orphans and nuns of Centallo."

According to Avetta, between 20 and 30 Jews knocked on the bishop's door looking for help during the years of war. If the pressure of arranging hiding places for them ever weighed on Monsignor Borra, he never showed it. Nor did the mother superior or Cucchietti ever falter in their commitments to Deborah and her children.

Luigi turned 10, then 11. Reginetta turned 6, then 7. Twenty months passed with them in good care but without their mother. They never knew about the times she was right behind them, watching them pray. Some mornings, Ferrari would sneak Deborah into Mass to see them from a distance. She couldn't hug them. She couldn't wave. She couldn't do anything to draw attention. Still, in those brief moments, Deborah found solace.

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After I hiked across the Swiss border, I returned to France to see Saint-Gervais on my way to Fossano. It makes sense if you look at a map. There's no easy way to do this trip over the Alps without a car, but I thought I'd found the easiest. I'd do a short train ride from Saint-Gervais to Chamonix. From Chamonix, I'd take a bus a few hours to Turin, arriving late. I'd spend the night in a hotel, then take a train to Fossano first thing in the morning. It was never in my fortune that this would go as planned. My bus didn't show up in Chamonix, and a phone call to the bus company confirmed that they had canceled the route, apparently without giving one ticket holder—me—notice.

Option B would involve 15 hours of overnight train-hopping. It was already 7 p.m., so I ran in a drizzle down the street to the station and got on the next train to Vallorcine, a commune on the Swiss border. I arrived at 8:10 p.m. and sprinted across the platform to catch the last train of the night to Martigny, Switzerland. An hour later, I transferred to another train, which took me across southwest Switzerland to Brig. From Brig, I got on a train to Domodossola, Italy. Now it was a little after 11 p.m., and the next train wasn't until 5:15 a.m. I stopped in the station for a moment, looking up directions to a hotel I'd booked on the way over. A police officer came up to me and pointed conspicuously at the handcuffs strapped to his belt. He asked for my passport.

“Is there a problem?” I said.

“The problem is you’re not showing me your passport when I ask you.” He was short but had a commanding posture.

“Why do you need it?”

I hesitated because I was skeptical that he was actually law enforcement—he wore a polo shirt with a not-very-official-looking badge embroidered on it, like a mall security guard uniform. I was also tired, confused, and nervous. I’d traveled around Europe plenty before, and I’d never been stopped by the police.

He raised his voice, taking no time to explain politely. “You came from Switzerland, right?”

“No, from France.” I had obviously taken trains *through* Switzerland, but that fact hadn’t fully registered. Now he thought I was being smart, and he was yelling at me for my passport. I slowly reached into my backpack and took out both of them. “I’m an American and German citizen,” I said.

“I don’t care if you’re from the Maldives,” he said. He tossed my German passport back into my open backpack and passed my American passport to his partner, a tall and skinny man with a boyish face. “What do you do for work?”

“I’m a journalist,” I said.

“A journalist? I’m going to give you something to write about,” he said. “We’ll need to search your bags.”

“Is there a reason why?” I said.

He threatened me. “This is your last chance to safely do as I say!”

My heart was beating faster. I was so immersed in researching my family’s story that my mind went to my great-grandfather’s arrest for buying milk and the police banging on my

great-grandmother's door in Cauterets. I still didn't know why this officer had picked me out from the crowd of people who'd exited the same train. I went to lay down my suitcase and it fell out of my hands with a thud. He did not like that.

"You will respect me!" he shouted. He started rummaging through my clothing and toiletries. "Where are you going?"

"To my hotel and then to Fossano in the morning," I said.

"Fossano?"

"My grandfather lived there," I said.

"Did you buy anything in Switzerland, any gifts for your grandpa?"

"My grandfather is dead," I said.

"When did he die?"

"February."

He turned to his partner and said, "*Suo nonno è morto*." Then he shut my suitcase, his partner handed me my passport, and they walked away.

I made it to my hotel but had trouble sleeping. I kept replaying my interaction with the police in my head, realizing how much this story was affecting me. In my dizzy, barely awake state, I saw him open my German passport, and it was stamped with a red letter J. Then my alarm rang, and I had to walk through pouring rain back to the station to take a 5:15 a.m. train to Novara, another train to Turin, and one last train to Fossano. I stared out the window on the final stretch, thinking about that night Deborah decided to jump. It was farmland all around. It must have been so dark when she opened the door. I wondered if the stars had been out.

I checked into my next hotel, then waited in the lobby for two former teachers from the Dominican school: Lidia Cavallera, who'd recently retired, and Corina Peretti, an English

teacher who now taught somewhere else. Both were still close with the current nuns at the same institution where Luigi and Reginetta had gone to primary school. Each gave me a big hug and an excited welcome when they met me. Peretti had goosebumps.

I hadn't realized how significant my arrival in Fossano would be. I was surprised to learn that my family's story had remained a big part of Fossanese lore. Most of my grandfather's part in it had been lost to time, but you could pick someone off the street and chances were good that they knew the name Reginetta from oral history passed between the nuns, passed on to their students, and passed on to the students' parents over generations.

Children at the Dominican school learn about Reginetta starting in their first-year history class. And on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the whole school comes together, and one of the teachers tells the story of a mother who jumped off a train to escape the Nazis, and her daughter, Reginetta, who was saved by the mother superior Maria Angelica Ferrari. A version has been performed as a play, called *L'orto di San Domenico*, in which Reginetta hides in the courtyard garden while the Nazis search the school for Jews.

Peretti and Cavallera took me to the Dominican school. They showed me Reginetta's former bedroom, which had been converted into a classroom. I sat in the chapel where the children went to morning Mass. Peretti pointed to the Madonna near the front of the room, and she told me that when Reginetta first arrived at the Dominican school, the mother superior took her to this chapel, where she taught her prayers in Latin and about Mary and Jesus. Ferrari told her that Mary, as a special kind of mother, would hear her prayers and know to protect her and her own mother, Deborah.

Later that afternoon, I went to Peretti's house to meet the descendants of Dr. Costanzi. Peretti had taught his great-grandchildren at the Dominican school. Costanzi's grandson, Franco, Franco's wife, Monica, and their children, Giulia, who was a university student in Milan, and Francesco, who was in his last year of high school, all greeted me with a box of local chocolates.

We sat around Peretti's dining table. "So," I said to Giulia, "your great-grandfather saved my great-grandmother's life?"

She said yes, and I thanked her, and she laughed because it wasn't her who'd done anything, but it felt proper for me to express my gratitude. It was incredible connecting with her family so many years since mine first came to Fossano, and she said she felt the same.

I showed her photographs of Deborah. She'd learned about her in school but never knew what she looked like. And I showed her a copy of a handwritten letter Dr. Costanzi had sent Deborah after the war. "I hope that you, your husband, and your children remain well and that fortune will continue to smile upon you," he wrote.

I was glad to see how proud Guilia and Francesco were of their great-grandfather. They'd put together a packet of newspaper clippings for me, including several articles published in memory of Dr. Costanzi.

After the war, he continued to devote his life to his patients, day and night, even as he struggled with heart disease. He liked to tell concerned loved ones, as if it would somehow comfort them, "Don't worry, I won't die of a broken heart but of a cerebral hemorrhage!" It was a little dark humor, a bit of ironic clinical detachment—and he was right. He was at work, preparing for a surgery, when he had a stroke. He died two days later, on Nov. 1, 1960. It was All Saints' Day. He was 59 years old.

The whole town grieved his death. A photograph of the funeral procession shows thousands of people walking behind the hearse as it drove through the center of Fossano. Dr. Costanzi had done so much for his community out of pure goodness, with no desire for profits. I saw that photo of all the people who loved him and whom he loved, and I wondered what motivation anyone could have to not act the same.

It impressed me how the people of Fossano have continued to celebrate their citizens who helped Jews during the Second World War. There's a monument to Lorenzo Perone, a Fossano-born bricklayer working under contract on an expansion project at Auschwitz. He brought food every day to the prisoner Primo Levi, who would become a famous author after the war. Levi attributed his survival to Perone and said that Perone always refused his thanks, once replying, "Why are we in the world if not to help each other?" Other sites and annual events honor the town's Righteous Among the Nations, recipients of the highest distinction awarded by the State of Israel to non-Jews who risked their lives to save victims of the Holocaust. From

Fossano they include Perone; Antonio Mana, a priest who hid a pregnant couple in a nearby farmhouse; Luigi and Maria Grasso, who sheltered nine members of a Jewish family; Giuseppe Meinardi, a banker who rescued two brothers, ages 10 and 16; and several others. Ferrari was named Righteous Among the Nations in 1992 with the advocacy of Regina and her daughter, Shelley. Regina had stayed in touch with Ferrari until the nun's death in 1972.

Italy's far-right leader may have worried me, but I had reasons to feel more optimistic and safer in Fossano than I had when I was in France. In the evening, I met a local journalist, Agata Pagani, who wanted to interview me for the newspaper, and I spoke openly with her about my family and the story I'd come to Fossano to write.

The following day, Pagani invited me to the offices of *La Fedeltà*, the same newspaper in which Monsignor Borra had been published 80 years earlier. Her editor shook my hand and welcomed me, and he brought out two massive binders containing the last original copies of the paper from the war. I opened one somewhere in the middle and came to the front page from Aug. 25, 1943, with the banner headline, "*L'Entusiastica Accoglienza di Fossano al Suo Pastore*" ("Fossano's Enthusiastic Welcome to Its Shepherd"). A portrait of the bishop looked back at me. There were photos of him arriving at the train station, the crowds of people there to greet him, and someone who looked very much like Antonio Cucchietti standing behind him at the welcoming ceremony. I flipped a few weeks forward, touching paper that had come off the press while Deborah and her children were in Fossano. I'm not a ghost guy, but I felt a shiver across my chest and a force weighing on my left shoulder, as if she were there with me.

Later, Corina Peretti took me to meet one of my grandfather's former classmates, Guido Bruno. It so happened that she'd been telling a friend that she was helping me with my research and it turned out that her friend's father had gone to the Dominican school at the same time as Louis. Bruno immediately remembered the day he met Luigi Schneider because the foreign surname had sounded so strange to him at the time. It was during recess one day, probably late 1943. Bruno was playing with a group of boys when Luigi joined without saying a word. They just thought Luigi didn't talk much; they hadn't a clue that he couldn't speak without giving himself away. Even at 89 years old, Bruno had never known that Luigi was Jewish until I came to his apartment and told him. I passed him a class photo taken in the school courtyard. Luigi was in it, the smallest boy, on the end in a sweater vest. The mother superior stood over him, smiling, her hand on his shoulder. I asked Bruno if he was in the photo. He held it in front of him and

squinted, then pointed. He was standing right by grandfather. His arms were crossed, and he was grinning. I looked at him, now 80 years later, and saw that same grin on his face.

Early the next morning, a Saturday, Peretti found someone to unlock the building that was formerly the Convitto Civico, the Salesian institution where Luigi had lived in clergy housing. It had closed in 1959 and was now a different school. I entered a courtyard, which I recognized from a photograph I'd seen of my grandfather sitting front row and center at the bishop's feet in a group of almost 100 clergy and other boys who must have lived or otherwise attended school there. Despite everything, he looked happy in the photo. There's a lot I'll never understand about him, but one thing I know is that he loved those people. He once suggested, in his Shoah Foundation testimony, that every priest who was in Fossano at the same time as him be beatified. "They were such unusual, wonderful people who were putting their lives on the line for one lousy kid who just happened to be around," he said.

I left through an alleyway behind the school. Spray-painted there, on the back wall of the former clergy housing, were two swastikas.

Death March

The third week of January, 1945, the men in Jawischowitz began to notice columns of skeletal people marching west past their camp. Soviet forces were closing in on Auschwitz, and the Nazis had started evacuating everyone who was able to walk. Work was halted in the coal mine, and on Jan. 18, Joseph and about 1,900 other Jawischowitz prisoners were added to a column coming from Auschwitz, joining what would later be known as the death march. Almost 60,000 prisoners were evacuated from the main camp and various sub-camps; 15,000 of them would die along the way. They were told they were going to another camp, somewhere in Germany, but not which camp or how long the journey would take.

The whole time, guards pointed guns at them. Anyone who fell behind was shot and left on the side of the road. "Left and right were bodies, bodies, bodies," said Kurt Hirschfeld, a Jawischowitz survivor, in a 2011 Shoah Foundation testimony. They marched nonstop through the cold winter night and rested only for a few hours in the morning, lying atop a meter of snow. Anyone who didn't die from hypothermia would continue on foot a total of 55 kilometers to the train station in Wodzisław Śląski, where they were loaded onto open-top cattle cars. They rode

for three days. The strongest among them were now down to their last 80 or so pounds. Hirschfeld recalled a thirst so painful, “I didn’t know you could hurt that much.” When he finally got off the train, he grabbed a handful of yellow snow, saturated with the urine of however many prisoners had come before him, and ate it.

Now they were in Buchenwald, a concentration camp in central Germany. Intake proceeded a lot like it had at Auschwitz. Many deceased remained frozen in the cars, but the living were marched into the camp, where they were fed a morsel of bread. The arriving prisoners had to bathe in a tank filled with a chemical disinfectant, which burned their skin, and they received new identification numbers, patched onto their uniforms. The old tattoos from Auschwitz remained, but for all administrative purposes, 160606 became 118194. The following day, Joseph was examined by a doctor and approved for work. He was then put on another train to a satellite camp, called Ohrdruf, about 45 kilometers away.

Many of the former Jawischowitz prisoners who were transferred to Ohrdruf, including Hirschfeld and an acquaintance of Joseph’s named Samuel Sitko, would say Ohrdruf was the worst of all of the horrible places they’d been. It’s not clear exactly what labor Joseph was forced to do there. Sitko worked on a tunnel-drilling project for a planned underground bunker that would contain Hitler’s emergency headquarters. Hirschfeld was made to stack corpses to be doused in gasoline and burned.

In Jawischowitz, the demand for coal was enough to dissuade the guards from killing too many prisoners on a whim. But in Ohrdruf, as the war neared its end and Germany faced an impending defeat, the Nazis were trying to finish off as many prisoners as they could, limited only by their supply of bullets. “They were shooting people just for fun,” Hirschfeld said. He recalled the guards cackling as the bodies hit the ground.

In Ohrdruf, prisoners slept on the ground in tents and old stables all winter long. The rations were smaller than they’d ever been, and medical care was nonexistent. It’s estimated that more than 7,000 prisoners died in Ohrdruf in the final four months between late November 1944 and when the U.S. Army arrived in early April 1945. There, the Americans found decomposing corpses left throughout the camp, including 30 bodies stacked in a shed and the charred remains of a partially burned pyre. War-hardened General George S. Patton vomited at the scene. Ohrdruf was the first concentration camp American troops encountered; before that, they

had learned of the Nazis' atrocities only from secondhand sources. Nobody imagined the camps were as bad as they'd heard—or even worse. "We are told the American soldier does not know what he is fighting for. Now, at least, we know what he is fighting against," said General Dwight D. Eisenhower after visiting Ohrdruf.

But by the time Eisenhower came through the camp gates, Joseph was already hundreds of kilometers away. The Nazis had hastily evacuated Ohrdruf in the days before the Americans arrived, and he was put on a train to Theresienstadt, a camp in German-occupied Czechoslovakia. Joseph was crammed into an open-top wagon, shoulder to shoulder with his fellow prisoners. As days passed and more people died, space was freed up for anyone left breathing to lay down on top of the bodies. The train rolled slowly through a barrage of bombings, and when it needed to stop, the prisoners could get out to relieve themselves, drink some water, and eat grass and little spring leaves. At one point, the tracks must have been damaged, and they were stuck in a field for more than a week. They watched the Allies flying overhead. They knew the war in Europe would be over in a matter of days. But staying alive that long was such a struggle. So many of them couldn't pull themselves back into the cars and died on the sides of the tracks.

It was the end of April when Joseph finally reached Theresienstadt with upwards of 15,000 other prisoners coming from a few different concentration camps. Theresienstadt had been established as an assembly center for Czech Jews being deported by the Nazis, but it was also a propaganda device. About a year earlier, the Nazis had invited representatives of the International Red Cross to visit Theresienstadt, to prove that they were bringing the Jews of Europe to well-kept settlements. The camp had been beautified with gardens and newly renovated barracks, and social events were staged. The regular torture resumed as soon as the tour was over. But by the time of Joseph's arrival, the truth had been exposed, and the International Red Cross was in the process of taking over the camp's administration. Everyone was given some bread and soup and a place to sleep in barracks, but there was a typhus outbreak, and many people who'd made it so far ended up dying in those final days of imprisonment.

On May 6, the last of the Nazis guarding Theresienstadt fled as the Soviets overwhelmed what was left of the German army nearby. Sitko recalled waking up in the morning and noticing that nobody was watching the front gate. "I walked out, and I saw the German army retreating. It was

about a mile away from the camp; they were marching in retreat, and what a beautiful sight that was," he said.

The Allies accepted Germany's surrender on May 8, 1945, eight days after Hitler killed himself with a gunshot to the head. Almost three years after Joseph had been abducted from France, now 44 years old, he was finally freed.

"Your Husband is Alive."

American troops arrived in Fossano in their jeeps, singing, throwing chocolate and chewing gum to the local children. Deborah ran to the Dominican school to tell Louis and Regina the news. The first thing Louis asked her was, "Will I be allowed to say that I am a Jew?" When she said yes, he replied, "I will pray to our G-d that Papa comes home." Avetta, the bishop's secretary, wrote that it was Louis who gave him the first hug he received on the day of liberation, in the square in front of the cathedral.

Deborah could finally hold her children again. For so long, she'd had to watch with envy as other mothers walked the streets freely with their sons and daughters. Now she could be one of those mothers. She began to hope for good news about her husband and her sister. She sent letters to Joseph's brothers in New York, asking whether they'd heard anything, and to Belgium, for Beila, but received no replies. A month passed, and another, and her hope waned. Then, one day in July, Deborah was napping in her chair during a noon break from her work at the hospital when a woman woke her: "*Signora*!" Deborah stood, and the woman handed her a letter requesting her presence at the town hall. "My legs gave way under me," Deborah wrote. She knew it meant news, more likely bad than good. "I tried to move but could not. The woman took hold of one of my hands and a nurse took me by the other, and they led me."

When she got to the town hall, Deborah couldn't bring herself to walk up the stairs. The nurse went up for her, and a moment later, the mayor came out and shouted, "Your husband is alive!" He had a letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome saying that Joseph was back in Antwerp, making inquiries about his family. "I cannot describe the dancing and the joyousness of the children," Deborah wrote. Some of the prominent people in town invited her to dinner to celebrate, but she was too excited to stay. She and the children packed up and left for Belgium as soon as they could.

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Joseph had been repatriated to Belgium on June 11, 1945, and was getting by with assistance from the Jewish community. Immediately, he started searching for his family. He had someone send a telegram to the Service d'Évacuation et de Regroupement des Enfants et Familles Juives, a Jewish family-regrouping service in Paris, which telephoned the OSE on Joseph's behalf, asking for information about Louis and Regina. The regrouping service sent two follow-up letters to the OSE office in Paris, one the following day and another a week and a half later, on June 26, having not heard any response. The OSE in Paris finally sent a telegram to its regional office in Toulouse, asking if Joseph's children were still living with the Amsellem family, to which the OSE in Toulouse responded that the Amsellems had moved to Corbeil, near Paris, but Louis and Regina were likely still with them. The OSE in Paris eventually passed the information on to the regrouping service, which took a few tries because two letters were apparently lost. Meanwhile, a letter from Deborah had reached Joseph's brother, Harry, in New York, and Harry sent a telegram to Joseph in Antwerp, telling him that his family was in Fossano.

He had two competing leads, but Joseph set off for Paris anyway in late July. Once there, the OSE tried to set up a meeting with the Amsellems, only to find out that Louis and Regina had left them in 1943. So Joseph left for Italy, but when he arrived at the Italian border and explained that he was searching for his family, the border officials checked their records and told Joseph that his wife and children had just crossed a day earlier, going to Nice. So, Joseph went to Nice. In Nice, he learned that they'd already left for Marseilles. He followed them once again.

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It was now the second week of August. Deborah had gone to Marseilles with a group of refugees bound for Paris, then Belgium. But while there, Deborah suddenly decided to go off on her own. She had a feeling that Joseph might try to look for her in the Pyrénées, where they'd last been together. She had Louis and Regina stay with the convoy, with some people who agreed to watch them, and planned to find them again in a few days at a refugee reception center set up at the Hotel Lutetia in Paris. Deborah returned to Cauterets but couldn't find any news of Joseph there, so, the next day, she went to the train station to travel to Paris.

Deborah stood waiting for her train, crying, upset at herself for sending her children off without her, when she heard a familiar voice call out: “Dora!”

She hardly recognized her husband, he was so swollen. “Joseph!” she called back.

“Where are the children?” he said. He was crying too.

But Deborah froze. She couldn’t reply.

“Tell me where the children are!” He started to panic.

She finally got her words out, and Joseph couldn’t believe that she had let them travel by themselves. But it wasn’t a moment to argue. The train to Paris had arrived, and they boarded together.

I’ve wondered what they said to each other on that long ride to Paris. Joseph was so anxious to see his children again, he must have wanted to know everything about them. But did he tell Deborah about the camps? Did she tell him how she jumped off the train? Did they just hold each other in silence the whole way? She never wrote about it. It probably wasn’t possible to put those hours into words.

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Louis was teasing his sister to tears, jumping up and down on a cot set up among many others in a big room at the Hotel Lutetia, when their parents walked in. It took Louis a moment to recognize his father. Regina didn’t recognize him at all. But she heard her brother and mother yell, “Papa is here!” So she hugged him and wouldn’t let go.

It had been five years since they’d left their home in Antwerp. They returned to find their old residence occupied and their sisters, brothers, and cousins registered among the dead. They moved into a dilapidated second-floor apartment above a bakery owned by a survivor who’d lost his wife and children.

There was no stove, no gas, no electricity, no running water, no glass in the windows. The whole inside got wet when it stormed. They only had some blankets and straw-filled mats from the Jewish committee, but they made it their home, a place to start over together—until they were separated once again. A family agency discovered their living conditions and took Louis and Regina away. Joseph was still in bad health after years of malnourishment and torture in the camps and had to spend some time recovering in the hospital while Deborah, left on her own, found work sewing. After several months, Joseph was discharged. But he was still in a frail state, and it was tough for him to get well in such a cold, uncomfortable apartment. It was hard for Deborah, too, who had to care for him.

Joseph tried to refuse help from their neighbors, but a few of their old friends insisted on giving them a little money, which made it possible to buy windowpanes and a stove, and to get the gas and electricity fixed. Things were getting better, and Joseph and Deborah were able to pick up Louis and Regina in April 1946, a few days before Passover. Before going home, they stopped at the oceanside town where they used to vacation every summer. There, they bought special dishes for the Passover seder, and, on the train ride back, Joseph and Deborah taught their children the Four Questions, a portion of the seder traditionally led by the youngest at the table.

Soon, Joseph started working. Deborah helped him, and they sent Louis and Regina to a Jewish school. For years, the children had had to hide their Jewishness. Now they were eagerly learning Yiddishkeit, and they were good students, as they'd been with the Catholic catechism. Louis had his bar mitzvah on Jan. 11, 1947. He put on *tefillin* with the *rebbe* of Narol, Rabbi Chaim Myer Yechiel Shapira, who had survived the war, then moved to Antwerp.

In June 1948, Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act, increasing the number of European refugees allowed to immigrate to the United States. Deborah preferred Israel. "I wanted to be in our own country," she wrote. But Joseph had four brothers in New York, and that's where he wanted to go. The United States had been his dream for so long. "I thought about it and admitted that if I had any sisters or brothers anywhere, I would also have wanted to run to where they were," Deborah continued. "I had no one. We therefore decided to go to America."

Joseph's brothers had already signed affidavits in support of their immigration. After the rest of their paperwork came through, on Dec. 16, 1948, Joseph, Deborah, Louis, and Regina left Antwerp aboard the SS *Ernie Pyle*, a transport ship named for the acclaimed American war

correspondent killed while reporting on the battlefield during World War II. They arrived in New York on Dec. 26. Joseph was 48 years old, Deborah 46, Louis 14, and Regina 10. But on that day, they felt as if they were beginning life anew. “It’s the point from which we really count our lives, leaving everything else behind,” Louis said.

It was hard getting started in New York. Joseph struggled to find work, but Deborah landed a job at a bakery, where she was paid $23 a week, working from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. each day until she worked herself ill and a doctor sent her to recover in the countryside. She’d made it through so much hardship, had had so much hope for America, and now she felt defeated. But when Deborah returned from convalescing, she noticed a dry-cleaning store was opening near their place on 2nd Avenue in Manhattan. She went inside and asked the owners if they were looking for a tailor, and they were. They started Joseph at $50 a week and soon gave him a $10 raise. This bit of stability gave Deborah the calm she needed. She’d lost 35 pounds but was gaining it back, and when the dry-cleaning store got busy, they hired her, too. Eventually, she and Joseph saved enough to buy their own store across the street. They called it Joe the Tailor.

For the first time in such a long time, she could say everything was good. “My son is 18 years old and is in college. My daughter is 14 and is in junior high school,” she wrote in 1952. “We lead a quiet Jewish life. Our children have a good Jewish education. With G-d’s help we hope to enjoy much pride and pleasure because of them, and we hope we shall have no more troubles.”

Louis graduated from City College and got a job as a biochemist at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, where he met my grandmother, Evelyn, an occupational-therapy student, in the cafeteria. They were married less than a year later, in September 1957, and had two children, a daughter, Beth, and a son, David—my father.

My father remembers his grandparents as the kindest of people. They loved each other, and they loved their children and grandchildren. They had no interest in material things. They made a good life in America and never wanted anything more. He remembers Deborah’s cooking and the rich smell of her latkes. It always smelled so awesome when he walked into their apartment. He remembers how Joseph loved watching professional wrestling on TV, and how he would repeat his simple mantra, “I am satisfied,” whether he’d finished a good meal or someone asked him how he was doing. He really was satisfied.

They ran their alterations and dry-cleaning store for almost 30 years, until the building it was in was about to be demolished. They planned to retire. On their last day of work, Jan. 13, 1981, Joseph closed the store for the last time, walked home, and died suddenly. He was 80 years old. Deborah died from cancer two years later, also at 80. Her final days were spent in the hospice section at Mercy Hospital, a Catholic hospital, with a cross hanging on the wall above her bed.

The Bleeding River

Kraków is a nice city. Kazimierz, the historic Jewish quarter, is where most of the nightlife is. There's been a little resurgence of the Jewish community, and it's not unusual to see Hasidim walking the streets. Still, it felt weird to be a Jew in Poland. In many shops, there are little figurines for sale, stereotypical caricatures of Jews, with long noses and black hats, holding coins and bags of money. They're popular good-luck charms in Poland, and people put them in their homes because they think the little Jews will bring financial fortune. I didn't like the figurines. They were strange things.

I'd come straight from Italy, and I got up early Sunday morning to catch a 7:30 a.m. train to Auschwitz. That was another weird thing, walking up to strangers and anxiously asking, "Is this the train to…" I couldn't finish the sentence. I didn't want to say it.

A man about to step through the doors turned to me and chuckled. He understood. "Yes, the train to Auschwitz," he said.

Auschwitz is the German name for the camp, but the town it's in is called Oświęcim. Many trains go daily, bringing tourists from Kraków, about an hour away. The visitor center at the memorial was buzzing with people when I got there. In a place where my family was murdered, I had to squeeze through a crowd to scan my entry ticket.

I joined a big tour group. It was a warm, sunny day, too nice to be in a death camp. The guide wore a flowery blue sundress. She led us through the main gate, under the infamous iron sign with that contemptuous lie: *Arbeit macht frei*, "Work will set you free." I wondered what Joseph thought when he saw those words, whether he believed them, if they gave him hope.

I'd been working on this story for so many months. I'd lost so many hours of sleep thinking about this place. Now I was here. I couldn't wait for the tour to be done. I didn't want to think about it anymore. I didn't want to see it.

We moved quickly. There was a lot to get to: the barracks, the gas chambers, the Death Wall—where thousands of prisoners were executed by firing squad—and so on. There was a room filled with hair—tons of real human hair, with braids still intact—that had been shaved off the heads of Jewish deportees. They don't let anyone take pictures of it. I wished the hair had been buried and not put behind glass. I suppose it says something powerful, but I questioned what else wasn't enough.

Later, we walked down a long, straight gravel path, the same path almost a million Jews had walked from the trains to the gas chambers. The ground was rough. I felt each stone beneath the soles of my shoes. The guide was walking beside me. We'd said nothing to each other, but then, just to me, she said quietly, "We're walking down this road, and we're free to turn around. Eighty years ago, it was only one way."

"Yeah," I said. "My great-grandaunt and her two children, they died here."

"So this is personal for you," she said.

"Yes, it is," I said.

"I've guided some other people who lost family here and people who were imprisoned here," she said. "It's a reminder that it was not long ago."

We reached the ruins of one of the gas chambers and its crematorium, which had been demolished before the camp was evacuated in an attempt to cover up the Nazis' crimes. The guide spoke to the group, but I didn't hear her.

Behind the demolished crematorium are four memorial tablets, which mark a spot where some victims' ashes were dumped. It's a Jewish custom to honor the deceased by placing a small stone at their gravesite to show that whoever is buried there has not been forgotten. There were only two stones placed atop the memorial, even though thousands of people had passed by it

on that busy summer weekend. I picked up a little piece of gravel and put it on one of the tablets. It was the closest thing to Beila's headstone that I could visit.

The Nazis intended to make the Jewish people disappear, so they had them cremated, which is forbidden in Judaism, and the ashes discarded. If no one could visit Jewish graves in remembrance, then the world might forget that they had existed. But many people were there, remembering in defiance of evil. In that way, we have won. And yet I fear it's not enough.

Jews are more than our dead kin. We are a living people and still a hated people. It's not just antisemitism—hate for all kinds of national, ethnic, religious, and gender identities is increasing. Enough people go to Auschwitz to pity the dead. Enough go to satisfy a morbid curiosity. They are remembering, but I don't know if they are learning. I wonder what they will do when refugees come to their communities.

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I left Auschwitz and took a train to Warsaw to meet up with Polish photojournalist Aleksandra Wierzbowska, who would drive me to Narol and be my interpreter. I'd known her only through Instagram, because of our similar careers, but I trusted her to help me on what I knew would be an especially intense part of my trip. She has documented deadly floods in Pakistan and the war in Ukraine. It was unlikely we'd encounter anything so dangerous, but we were going to a place where my family had been violently removed, to uncover some of the darkest events in history. I needed someone who was prepared for that. And I was glad she was experienced in the context of Ukraine. Narol is fewer than 18 kilometers from the border, and the war was in full swing. Just five days earlier, on Sept. 4, a Russian missile attack killed seven people in Lviv, formerly Lemberg and now part of Ukraine, where Deborah used to sell sugar on the black market.

From Warsaw, we drove for almost four hours into the countryside, far from any main tourist attraction. "It's prettier than I expected it to be," I said as we came into town down a two-lane road gently winding through a dense forest.

Jews were among the early settlers of Narol and Lipsko in the first half of the 17th century. The population grew quickly as more Jews fleeing persecution moved there and built an economy

trading grains, skins, and lumber all the way to the north coast of Poland. Everything was destroyed in 1648, when Cossacks, under the command of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, invaded Narol and slaughtered thousands of Poles and Jews in the surrounding area. The Jewish community in Narol and Lipsko had reestablished itself by the end of the 18th century, but it never returned to its original state. Eventually, the Nazis expelled the last of them. No Jews moved back after World War II.

Wierzbowska and I checked into a bed-and-breakfast, then drove to the square in the center of Narol. There used to be Jewish homes around the square. Now those homes were gone, replaced by unassuming small-town establishments: a convenience store, a pharmacy, a police station, an ice-cream truck that seemed to be permanently parked in its place. We waited there to meet a local man. I had made some inquiries looking for someone who could show me around, and I was connected to Robert Gmiterek, a poet, the editor-in-chief of a regional magazine, and a historian of eastern Poland. He greeted us, then guided us down the street to begin our tour. We walked, and Wierzbowska translated as he spoke about life in the borderlands. For centuries, this region has faced invasion after invasion. Gmiterek said the people here are prepared for another one at all times. Fears were heightened with the war going on in Ukraine that Russia could target Poland next, but that's essentially life as it has always been in Narol.

The first site Gmiterek brought us to was the Jewish cemetery, which was shared with the Jews of Lipsko. There's no way of knowing how many of my relatives are buried there. Hundreds, maybe—cousins, uncles, and aunts of various degrees, my great-great-grandparents, Isack and Rifka, Leib and Ruchel. We arrived at a 2-meter stone wall with a solid metal gate locked shut. Gmiterek didn't know of anyone with the key, but I was able to peer through horizontal cracks in the wall and see long, golden grasses growing at the bottom of a little hill. Wierzbowska recognized the metaphor: for all the research I'd done into my family's history, I'd only seen a narrow view. Everything I had pieced together about my great-grandparents was barely anything in the course of their whole lives. Then there were all of my family members buried behind that wall. I'd never know their stories. And even without my restricted view, there were no names for me to read—no tombstones for me to stand before. The Nazis had had them destroyed. I picked up a little stone and placed it atop the wall.

The tour continued. Almost no records have been preserved from the Jewish community in Narol and Lipsko, but Gmiterek had done some generous research and found where Hersch Sandbank—one of Deborah's older brothers—had lived. Now it was an empty plot behind the grocery store, the site of some overgrown bushes and a crushed beer can. We kept walking down the main street, stopping to see where the synagogue had been. It was now someone's torn-up yard, their dog chained to a post behind a chain-link fence. A little farther down the street, we crossed the bridge over the river that divides Narol and Lipsko. The river was shallow, it barely moved, and tall grasses filled its marshy bottom. It was an unremarkable-looking thing with a storied past. The Jews of Narol and Lipsko used to use it for *Tashlikh*, which means "to cast," an atonement ceremony done at a natural body of water on Rosh Hashanah to symbolically cast away our sins at the beginning of each year. Back then, the river was named Pohyblica, a word with Ukrainian origins that roughly translates to "death." But, sometime in the 1930s, the name was changed to the Polish word Krwawica, meaning "bleeding." It's said that the water had turned red with blood in the massacre of 1648.

Gmiterek walked us around Lipsko, a quiet village, as the sun began to set, and we made our way back to where we'd started in Narol. That's how small these towns are. Taking our time, stopping to talk and see things, we walked across one and the other and back in just a couple of hours. Before we parted, Gmiterek gave me a copy of his magazine, *Przestrzeń Pogranicza*, filled with photographs and stories of the past and present in the eastern borderlands. He said it was the last copy of that issue, from September 2022. In it were a few blank pages to represent the lost Jewish history in the region, much of which was erased in the Holocaust. He hoped that, with my work, we might begin to fill them in.

The next day, Wierzbowska and I drove 10 minutes to the memorial at the extermination center in Bełżec. It's not a popular tourist destination like Auschwitz—most people have never heard of it—but it was the main killing site for the Jews of the former Galicia, where about 500,000 of them were murdered in gas chambers with the use of diesel engines. The German officer Kurt Gerstein, having witnessed a gassing operation there, later wrote of the moment the chamber door opened, "The people were still standing upright, like pillars of basalt, since there had not been an inch of space for them to fall in or even lean. Families could still be seen holding hands, even in death."

The memorial was incredible. There were no remnants of the place like there were at Auschwitz, but a massive sculpture had been installed over the grounds—a heap of rock and iron rubble covering the area of several football fields. There's a cobblestone path through the middle of it, with concrete walls on each side that got taller the farther down I went. The walls were going up, but it felt like I was going down, beneath the rubble, into the ground, into a trap, down the monster's throat. The walls swallowed me.

I expressed to Wierzbowska my frustration that I did not think I would be able to adequately describe the place with words, that I wouldn't be able to paraphrase the artist's metaphor. She felt it too. "You cannot really say everything with words. They are sometimes too small for it, for these kinds of experiences," she said. "Words are limited because not everyone can understand English or Polish, but here, it doesn't matter where you come from, what language you speak. You just understand it."

The final place I wanted to go to was the road built from my ancestors' tombstones. When the Nazis turned Narol and Lipsko into the site of a labor camp, the prisoners were forced to use the stones from the Jewish cemetery for paving material. The same thing was done in other places the Germans occupied. Hundreds of Jewish tombstones—*matzevot*, in Hebrew—were unearthed from the market square in Leżajsk, Poland, in 2020. They'd been laid along 30 meters of road beneath sand and bricks, which the Nazis had taken from the town's synagogue. Eventually, the bricks were paved over, and almost everyone forgot what was underneath. The same thing happened to the *matzevot* of Narol.

It was about a 30-minute drive. There's no obvious spot. It's just a two-lane road through the farmlands between Cieszanów and Zamch. It was raining, and the asphalt glistened like it was new. Somewhere beneath, the names were written: Isack and Rifka, Leib and Ruchel. I asked Wierzbowska to drive softly, as if that meant anything. She pulled over, and I stepped out into the middle of the road. It was peaceful. There were little white flowers in the grass on both sides. "At least it's a nice road," I said.

Wierzbowska dropped me off at our accommodations. I was tired and wanted to lie down, and she wanted to take some photos of Narol and Lipsko in the rain. She wasn't gone long before my phone rang. "I found someone with the key to the cemetery," she said.

I almost didn't believe her. "What?" I said. "Come pick me up."

She had been taking photos outside of the cemetery when an old man who lived across the street came to see what she was doing. They began talking, and she told him about my story. She said that she was looking for a better view over the wall. He was disingenuous at first. But, after a bit of back and forth, he confessed that he had the key, though he didn't explain why.

The gate had been left unlocked when Wierzbowska and I returned together. We walked to the top of the hill, where there was an*ohel*, a basic shelter for visitors to pray under. On the floor, someone had placed a few pieces of headstone, some shards of whatever was left behind. On one piece was an א and part of a ס; on another, the remaining Hebrew letters. Put together, they spelled "Esther Katz." I prayed for her. I prayed for my ancestors buried there and told them about the good lives their descendants have lived.

It was almost dark when we made our way back down the hill. As we were leaving, the old man came to lock the gate again. He wore peculiar clothing, with a red shirt under a black suit. I shook his hand and thanked him, and he and Wierzbowska started conversing in Polish. He told her that Jews used to come from Belgium, Israel, and all over the world to visit the cemetery, but they stopped coming after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Then he revealed a secret. He claimed to have more headstones stashed in his basement. The man said that he had found some scattered somewhere near his property many years ago. He later met a woman from a nearby town who offered to buy them. He stored them for her, but she never came.

I had Wierzbowska ask him if I could have them. It wasn't right that the *matzevot* sit in his basement or be sold, but I could pass them on to a museum or the Narol Hasidic dynasty, now based in Israel. The man said he would look for them and gave Wierzbowska his number so we could meet him again the next day. When we called in the morning, he told us that the headstones were gone.

How I Reported This Story

I obtained thousands of pages of prewar and wartime documents concerning my family from Yad Vashem; the Arolsen Archives; the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; the Antwerp Police Immigration Index (1840–1930) at ancestry.com; the FelixArchief in Antwerp,

with help from Reinier Heinsman; the Archives départementales des Hautes-Pyrénées, with help from Sonia Lemaire; the Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants, with help from Nancy Lefenfeld; the Kazerne Dossin Memorial, Museum, and Documentation Centre; the Archives départementales de Haute-Savoie; the Terezín Memorial; and the town hall and bishop's archives in Fossano. I conducted research at New York University and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York, and at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Shapell Center in Bowie, Maryland. I listened to hundreds of hours of survivor testimonies preserved by the USC Shoah Foundation. The following were invaluable for my research: Arthur Green, Rose Friedman, Charles Schechter, Tamara Branitsky, Joseph Talpert, Gisele Stevens, Sigi Hart, Bracha Scheinman, Danielle Wolfowitz, Ruth Gellis, Herbert Korner, Rita Verba, Bernard Ehrenberg, Bluma Weinstock, Jack Kowal, Regina Weisfelner, Jack Pinto, George Rosenthal, Isser Laufer, Maurice Moore, Abram Katz, Zalman Poznanter, Kurt Hirschfeld, Natan Caron, Samuel Sitko, Morey Sanders, Harry Simon, Walter Lessman, Morris Kornberg, Kurt Frankfurter, Moric Friedman, Eugene Fried, Simon Laufer, Rafal Dominic, Zoltan Blau, David Halpern, and William Sperber. I also made use of two interviews with Leo Bretholz, one by Linda G. Kuzmack in 1989 and another by Sandra Bradley in 1992; "The Life Story of Karl Fox," published online by the National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism; and "The Testimonies of Georges Priszkulnik," published by his son, David Lee Preston, at davidleepreston.com and in The Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*.*

I am indebted to the following authors and their works: Nicholas N. Golovine, The Russian Campaign of 1914 *(The Command and General Staff School Press, 1933); Schraga-Feivel Lehrer, "Chapters of Memories," in* The Cieszanow Memorial Book*, ed. David Ravid, trans. Jacob Solomon Berger (The Organization of Émigrés from Cieszanow in Israel, 1970); Zvi Avital et al.,* Pinkas Hakehillot: Encyclopaedia of Jewish Communities; Poland*, ed. Danuta Dabrowska et al., vol. 2,* Eastern Galicia *(Yad Vashem, 1980); Paul Robert Magocsi,* A History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples*, 2nd ed. (University of Toronto Press, 2010); Geoffrey Jukes,* The First World War: The Eastern Front 1914–1918 *(Bloomsbury Publishing, 2002); John R. Schindler,* Fall of the Double Eagle: The Battle for Galicia and the Demise of Austria-Hungary *(Potomac Books, 2015); Suzan Wynne,* The Galitzianers: the Jews of Galicia, 1772–1918*, (Suzan F. Wynne, 2006); The Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs,* Belgium: The Official Account of What Happened, 1939–1940 *(Evans Brothers Limited, 1941); Ephraïm Schmidt, "Antwerp: The Holocaust Period (1939–1945)," in* Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., ed. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum, vol. 2 (Macmillan Reference USA, 2007); Michael R. Marrus and Robert O.*

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I consulted the following institutions and resources: the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews; Urząd Miasta i Gminy Narol; Historia Regionu Tomaszów Lubelski Bełz Rawa Ruska; Musée de la résistance en ligne; the Naval History and Heritage Command; the National WWII Museum; the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure Project; the Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau; Joods Monument; the United States Department of State; Tiergartenstrasse 4 Association; Fundacja Pobliskie Miejsca Pamięci Auschwitz-Birkenau; Salesiani di Don Bosco; the Buchenwald Memorial; the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's digital Holocaust Encyclopedia; Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, ed. Geoffrey P. Megargee, vol. 1, part A, "Early Camps, Youth Camps, and Concentration Camps and Subcamps under the SS-Business Administration Main Office" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Indiana University Press, 2009); and* Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, ed. Martin Dean, vol. 2, part A, "Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Indiana University Press, 2012).*

I referenced decrees published in the Journal officiel de la République française *with research help from Sonia Lemaire. The Polish genealogist Grazyna Rychlik was also of help. I interviewed several people in addition to those named in the text, most notably Ana Sandbank and the Naroler Rebbe Berish Schapiro. Corina Peretti interviewed a number of Fossano residents on my behalf. For Deborah's personal experiences, I relied on her 1952 memoir, except for a few minor details filled in from her 1980s memoir. Both of her memoirs had been translated from Yiddish to English by E.Z. Dobkin. Sonia Lemaire and Bella Hass Weinberg translated various documents and book excerpts for me. Many of the quotes in this story have been translated into English from their original Yiddish, French, Italian, or German.*