



Alex's Wake

A Voyage of Betrayal
and a Journey of Remembrance

Martin Goldsmith

AUTHOR OF *The Inextinguishable Symphony*

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To the memory of my brother, Peter, and, once again, to Amy

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And I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

—Job

All right, I've told you my story. Now I want you to do something for me. Take me out to Cypress Hill and we'll hear the dead people talk. They do talk there. They chatter together like birds on Cypress Hill, but all they say is one word and that word is "live," they say, "Live, live, live, live, live!" It's all they've learned, it's the only advice they can give. Just live.

—Tennessee Williams

Setting Forth

THAT TIMELESS AMERICAN TRAVELER, Huckleberry Finn, introduces himself this way: “You don’t know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain’t no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly.” Some years ago, I made a book by the name of *The Inextinguishable Symphony* and told the story of my father and mother. In that book, my father mostly appeared as a young man named Günther Ludwig Goldschmidt who, by dint of good fortune and dogged persistence, escaped Nazi Germany and arrived on Ellis Island in June 1941. Shortly thereafter, he changed his name to George Gunther Goldsmith, and he and his young wife Rosemary began their lives in The Land of the Free. It’s a good book, I think, and I’m proud of it. And, yes, I told the truth, mainly.

I finished writing *The Inextinguishable Symphony* on December 31, 1999, just as the clock crept toward the close of a century as brutal and bloody as any in the history of our glorious and unhappy planet. The book was published in September 2000, and I began what my wife generously calls “The Never-Ending Book Tour.” I’m pleased to say that I have made well over a hundred appearances on behalf of the book, speaking from one end of the United States to the other and in such foreign cities as Toronto, Berlin, and St. Petersburg. I mention these facts not in a spirit of self-aggrandizement so much as to give weight to the additional fact that in nearly every city I am asked, “So, after writing this book, what has happened to your Jewish identity? And what was your father’s reaction to the book?” I’m not sure I realized it at the time, but my attempts to answer those questions represent the first stirrings of the journey that has resulted in the making of this book.

I think that my father had a rather ambivalent reaction to *The Inextinguishable Symphony*. He was pleased at its favorable reception, happy for my opportunities to discuss it, and honored to have been the subject of the book, but I think it also made him profoundly uncomfortable, and in no small measure ashamed. In many ways, Günther Goldschmidt is the hero of the book. George Goldsmith, however, didn’t feel like a hero. Mr. Mark Twain would have called that heroic portrait a “stretching of the truth, and, much as it pains me to acknowledge it, he would have been right.

George’s father, my grandfather Alex Goldschmidt, and his younger brother, my uncle Klaus Helmut Goldschmidt, were two of the more than nine hundred Jewish refugees who attempted to flee Nazi Germany in May 1939 on board an ocean liner called the *St. Louis*. The fate of that ship commanded global attention for a few weeks that spring—the *New York Times* declared it “the saddest ship afloat today”—as it attempted to find safe harbor in an unwelcoming world. After more than a month at sea, my grandfather and uncle found themselves in France, where they would remain for the next three years. They spent time in a number of different settlements, each less hospitable than the last, before being shipped to their deaths at Auschwitz in August 1942.

Alex had spent four years fighting in the muddy, ghastly trenches of the First World War, achieving the distinction of the Iron Cross, First Class from a presumably grateful German government. In the uneasy peace that followed the Great War, he achieved success as a businessman and parlayed his profitable women's clothing store into a lofty position in the emerging society of his adopted hometown of Oldenburg. Never one to allow life's circumstances to dictate terms to him, where he could help it, Alex was a man of forthright action and blunt expression. Even while caught in the snares of his French imprisonment, he wrote impassioned letters to those in charge, stating the case for his freedom and that of his younger son. And he sent letters to his older son, my father, to spur him into action on their behalf.

In his very last letter to George, Grandfather Alex recounted the horrors he and Helmut had endured since boarding the *St. Louis* more than three years earlier. With all the pent-up pain and frustration of his captivity flowing through his pen, Alex concluded, "I have already described our situation for you several times. This will be the last time. If you don't move heaven and earth to help us, that's up to you, but it will be on your conscience."

My father and mother had managed to emigrate to the United States in June 1941. They had survived as Jews in Germany until then because of their status as musicians in an all-Jewish performing arts organization called the *Kulturbund*. Once in America, they both found menial jobs: my mother as a domestic, cooking and cleaning houses for twelve dollars a week, and my father working in a factory where he cut zippers out of discarded pants and polished them on a wheel, reconditioning them so that they could serve again in the flies of new trousers. For this, he was paid fourteen dollars a week. They didn't have much, but they occasionally sent as much as twenty-five dollars, nearly a full week's salary, via Quaker intermediaries to the camps in France to try to ease the burden of Alex and Helmut.

But did my father do as much as he could have on his family's behalf? Did he, as his father had implored him, "move heaven and earth"? Probably not. In the late summer of 1941, my parents landed jobs performing at a music festival in Columbia, South Carolina. They took the train from their home in New York City down to Columbia, passing through Washington, D.C., on their journeys south and north. Neither time did my father disembark in the capital to visit the halls of Congress, where he might have found an important ally who could have helped him to fill out the proper form or contacted the right immigration officer who might have reached the exact authority in France in time to ensure that Alex and Helmut never boarded that fateful train to Auschwitz. There were reasons aplenty why every effort under the sun might have failed to win his family's freedom, but the inescapable fact remains that Alex begged his son to save his life and my father failed to do so.

"It will be on your conscience," wrote Alex, and Alex was right. In 1945, with the end of the war, the grisly newsreels appeared, documenting the full range of the atrocities that the Nazis had perpetrated, unspeakable crimes that included the murders of my father's family as five among the six million. In addition to Alex and Helmut, dead in Auschwitz, there were Toni and Eva, my grandmother and aunt, deported to Riga, and my father's Grandmother Behrens, murdered in Terezin. The next year, my father gave up his flute and the music profession that he loved in favor of a job selling furniture in a department store, an act of penance for his failure to save his family. In a revealing letter, sent late in his life, my father wrote, "The unanswered question which disturbs me most profoundly and which I shall carry to my own death is whether through an enormous last-minute effort I could have saved my father and brother from their horrible end."

The guilt that my father carried he passed on to my brother, Peter, and me as our emotional inheritance. The violent fates of their families (my mother, an only child, lost her mother to the camp

at Trawniki) were a subject my parents assiduously avoided in my early years. No doubt they wished to protect Peter and me from the truth, for fear that we might have trouble sleeping at night developing a sense of trust. How little they suspected that, even without words, we could feel and absorb the unspoken pain that circulated like dust in the air of our home, and how much we were aware of the darkness, the enormous unknown yet deeply felt secret that obscured the light of the truth.

My parents' way of dealing with their guilt and sadness was to deny it and keep it hidden. Big secrets derive a significant part of their power from silence and shame. "They died in the war," was my father's curt reply to my brother's direct question about why, unlike all our friends, we couldn't visit our grandparents at Christmas or birthdays. There was nothing more, no stories, no reassurance that their fate would not be ours. And there was no acknowledgment that we were Jews, despite this being the singular reason for our family's violent dismemberment. When I, as a teenager, discovered our religious roots, my father dismissed it all by declaring that we were, at most, "so-called Jews." He did not choose to regard himself as a Jew, despite the unavoidable fact that he'd been bar mitzvahed that his parents were both Jews, and that he and his wife had both performed in an all-Jewish orchestra. "Adolf Hitler thought I was a Jew, so I had no choice. I choose to exercise that choice now. I am not a Jew," he said.

As I grew to manhood, I became aware of my inherited guilt. In my forties, I began to research the story of my parents' lives in Germany and of their families' lives as well, a tale that I told in *The Inextinguishable Symphony*. But over the years since that book's publication, I have come to see the tale as only the starting point of a journey of self-discovery that I unknowingly began the moment I first asked a question about what happened to my family.

I've come to feel a deep need to connect with that vanished generation, with those members of my family who were murdered a decade before I was born. In one of his letters, my grandfather acknowledged that he was writing on the morning of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. He obviously self-identified as a Jew. So I began to explore Judaism, partly as a purely spiritual quest, but mostly as a way to reach back through those vanished years to try to touch my grandfather. When I heard the Kol Nidre prayer intoned on Yom Kippur, my eyes would fill with tears because of the melancholy beauty of the melody, and also because I knew that, once upon a time, my grandfather had heard that same melody on that same holy night. In the autumn of 2006, I began a twenty-month course of study, discussion, and learning that culminated in my becoming a Son of the Commandment, a Bar Mitzvah Boy, at the age of fifty-five.

With the help of my wife and my therapist, I came to recognize a rhetorical question that hung over me like the mist that follows in the wake of an ocean liner. "How can I ever be truly happy, how can I ever deserve happiness," I would say to myself, "when my grandfather was murdered at Auschwitz?"

I realized also that, although my grandmothers and aunt had been murdered as well, it was the story of Alex and Helmut that fully galvanized my interest. I became consumed with a desire to know the facts of their voyage on the *St. Louis* and of their three years' imprisonment in France. Eventually it occurred to me why, beyond a certain spectator's curiosity, that was so. I wanted to learn the facts of their final years on earth because I wanted to save them. My father had failed, and the responsibility had passed to me. I was the backstop, the catcher racing up the first base line to snag an errant throw from an infielder. I couldn't save them, of course. Again, they died ten years before I was born. But my father's burden had become mine and his guilt was mine as well. If I couldn't save them, the least I could do was to place flowers on their graves, to tell the world their story, and to bear witness.

In March 2006, my wife and I visited my father in Tucson, where he and my mother had moved following their retirement, and where George had remained following my mother's death in 1988. George was now ninety-two years old and living alone, and Amy and I thought it was probably time to bring up the subject of assisted living. There is a nice facility nearly across the street from our home in Maryland, and we spent what we thought was a productive Saturday afternoon discussing a possible move east. My father asked several pointed questions but seemed quite interested in the prospect of living so close to Washington, D.C., and all its political and cultural attractions. When we parted that evening, Amy and I breathed sighs of relief, assuming that most of the heavy lifting had been accomplished.

The following morning, when we raised the issue again at breakfast, George became indignant, accusing us of conspiring to take him away from the home he loved. "But yesterday you said that was such a good idea!" I exclaimed, frustrated by what I took to be the simple querulousness of a cranky old man. We flew back to Maryland that afternoon, unsure what to do.

Within a few weeks our way forward became painfully clear. A neighbor had come to visit George and found him in a heap on the floor, unable to rise. He was taken to a hospital, and several days later a neurologist called me with the news that my father had Alzheimer's disease. What I had taken for a disagreeable refusal to acknowledge a logical plan of action had in reality been my father's simple inability to remember a conversation from one day to the next.

There followed a nightmare of weeks of legal maneuvering attempting to persuade the state of Arizona to declare me George's legal guardian so that I could move him to Arbor Place, an Alzheimer's facility near us in Maryland. The single worst day of my life came in late June, when we somehow got him on an airplane, doing our best to ignore his repeated vehement declarations that we were behaving like a Nazi and that Amy was a willing Nazi *hausfrau*. His use of those epithets was doubtless evidence of his illness, but no less ironic or painful for all of that.

A slow, sad diminuendo marked the last years of George Goldsmith, during which I had frequent opportunities to visit with Günther Goldschmidt, the young man I'd come to know while working on *The Inextinguishable Symphony*. As I sat with him in the fenced-in garden of Arbor Place at twilight or, increasingly as time went on, by his bedside in his tiny room, on a slippery brown leather chair we'd brought along from his home in Arizona, he would speak lovingly and longingly of his long-lost homeland. At times, his memories would skip across decades, as when he declared that he first heard the news of President Kennedy's assassination from a passerby on Gartenstrasse, where he'd lived as a child in Oldenburg. Mostly, though, he would share with me his happy memories of playing in the Schlossgarten, the elegant park, formerly the ducal gardens, that began just steps from his father's spacious house. Many were the times that we would plan a return visit to his hometown that I knew would never happen; we'd fly to Amsterdam, I told him, and after a day or two take the train (oh, how he loved trains!) to Osnabrück and then to Oldenburg. He would show me all the sights, we'd hear music in the thirteenth-century Lambertikirche, and we'd stroll together through the Schlossgarten admiring the rhododendrons and throwing bread crumbs to the ducks who swam contentedly in the park's peaceful ponds. Invariably after these fanciful conversations, my visit would end, he would fall into a happy sleep, and I would drive home in tears.

Then, as a gentle spring took hold in 2009, his decline quickened. In the middle of a rainy April night, a phone call summoned me to a suburban hospital where my father had been rushed when his caretaker at Arbor Place discovered him struggling for breath. A few days later, he was returned to his own little bed under hospice care; his doctor, without explicitly saying the words, prepared me for the end. On Wednesday night, April 29, I had the chance to say goodbye. My father, shrunken and shaken

by his last struggles, could no longer reply as I told him that I loved him and thanked him for my life and for my love of music. He grasped my hand with what must have remained of his strength and opened his eyes wide before closing them and sinking back into his pillow. The next day, shortly after noon, his long journey ended at last.

Exactly eleven months later, on March 30, 2010, I received the shocking, inexplicable news that my brother had died. A once brilliant student at Stanford University who, like me, had gone into the business of introducing classical music on the radio, Peter had in recent years been struck low by physical ailments and a profound depression that, I am sure, was exacerbated by the long-standing family guilt and shame. Now he was gone, quickly felled by a heart attack. He was sixty. The only person of my generation who understood the issues I'd grown up with, intimately and with no need for explanation, had disappeared. My parents, the other two people who'd known me all my life, were also gone. I was suddenly alone, the last Goldsmith standing.

As I struggled to make sense of my unfamiliar place in the universe and to come to terms with my sorrow, one certainty seemed to wrap itself comfortingly around me, as if I'd slipped on a well-worn flannel shirt on a cold morning. I would once again write a book about my family. The family had been reduced to all but nothing, but I would do my best to see that it lived on. I would tell the story of my Grandfather Alex and Uncle Helmut, of their journey on the *St. Louis* and their unhappy odyssey through France. Having lost my father and my brother, I would write about my father's father and his brother. Perhaps I was trying to cling to what had slipped away forever. But whatever the source of my decision, I told myself that I would write the book so that it could be completed by the day I, too, reached sixty. I didn't have much time.

I began by paying several visits to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the immense building on the National Mall in Washington, solemnly designed to suggest a concentration camp. I knew that Alex and Helmut had landed in France in June 1939 and that they'd arrived in the Rivesaltes concentration camp in January 1941, but where and how they had passed those interim eighteen months remained a mystery.

grateful, and not for the first time, for the easygoing friendliness of small-town American ways.

Mr. Shoemate was eager to talk about Pawhuska's sister city in far-off France, and more than happy to give me the e-mail address of his primary contact in Montauban, Jean-Claude Drouilhet. I immediately wrote to M. Drouilhet to ask him what, if anything, he knew about foreign Jews who might have been held in Montauban in the early days of World War II. I was delighted when M. Drouilhet responded almost immediately, excited when he declared that my subject was of extreme importance to him, and thrilled when he wrote again a few days later to tell me that he'd gone to the police headquarters in Montauban and had unearthed some information sure to be of interest to me. He had digitally photographed his discoveries and attached them to his e-mail. I clicked them open and there were two more cards, similar to those filled out at Rivesaltes, these dominated by a large red letter *J* carved in blood, it seemed, in the upper left. Again I read the usual details of Alex and Helmut's birthdays, professions, and the names of their relatives, but here was a line that listed where they'd been prior to their arrival in Montauban. On the line was written clearly "Martigny-les-Bains. Another clue!

Within days, I had confirmed with an archivist at the Holocaust Museum that, yes, a number of *St. Louis* refugees who'd disembarked in France had been taken to Martigny-les-Bains, a village in the northeast that had enjoyed a degree of prosperity at the turn of the twentieth century as a spa town with renowned healing waters. Just why Alex and Helmut had been brought there remained a bit of mystery, but now the course of their journey through France had become clearer.

Then, as the long winter began to wane and the days began to lengthen, with their promise of another spring and its infinite possibilities, my grandfather and uncle's itinerary began to burn itself into my brain with an improbable urgency. Boulogne-to-Martigny-to-Montauban-to-Agde-to-Rivesaltes-to-Les Milles-to-Drancy-to-Auschwitz. That list of names became as familiar to me as my own address and telephone number. Late one night, it came to me what I must do: I knew that I needed to retrace their steps, to set foot on the earth they trod during those final three years of initial hope and eventual hopelessness, to see what they saw and to breathe the air they breathed before they breathed their last. I would tell their story as a grandson, a nephew, and an eyewitness.

Their stories were more than their last years, however, so I decided to begin my journey where my grandfather started his, the little village of Sachsenhagen in Germany's Lower Saxony. I would then travel to Oldenburg, where Alex established his business and where Günther and Helmut were born, and then to Hamburg, where the *St. Louis* began its unhappy voyage. I would then cross the Low Countries to meet up metaphorically with Alex and Helmut when they landed in Boulogne-sur-Mer and from there follow them along their winding road to Auschwitz.

Though I share my father's love of trains, it seemed to me that the nature of this journey would require a car. I consulted a map. Adding up the distances I was able to estimate between destinations, I concluded that I would be traveling a minimum of thirty-five hundred miles, more than a drive across the United States from east to west. Given the time I would reasonably need in each city, I decided that the trip would last about six weeks.

The journey began to take on a life of its own, becoming a force that seemed to be willing me onward, dominating my thoughts by day and my dreams by night. I found myself exhilarated by the prospect one minute and then consumed by fears and doubts the next. My greatest fear was that I would fly home from Europe at the end of the six weeks thinking to myself, "Well, *that* was a colossal waste of time!" I also feared coming face to face with the daily record of my family's descent into death, and I wondered just how I would find my way through the heart of Europe with my limited German and my nearly nonexistent French. And I was fully conscious of the immense contra-

between Alex and Helmut's journey and mine, how they had been prisoners caught in a Kafkaesque quagmire of bureaucracy, indifference, and cruelty; what they had to endure as their rations were reduced and they lost weight and hope; and how I would be traveling in an air-conditioned car, staying in lovely hotels, with all of France's celebrated cuisine at my fingertips. Was this quest of mine in some fashion a monstrous game of dress-up and make-believe, not so much a tribute to my grandfather and uncle as a mockery of their suffering?

Just weeks before my departure, I asked my wife if she would accompany me on this grand adventure, to temper my fears and also to share in the pleasures of the experience, the new sights, sounds, and tastes we would surely encounter on the road. "Grief can take care of itself," wrote Mark Twain, "But to get full value of a joy you must have somebody to divide it with." She said yes, bless her.

So, on Tuesday, May 10, 2011, we set forth. I took along small photographs of Alex and Helmut, a single suitcase, and a small box containing my father's ashes, a box that had spent the previous two years in the shadows of an upstairs closet. It was time, I'd decided, for Günther to make his return to his cherished homeland. I also packed the fervent hope that in the coming six weeks, I might learn much about the ordeal of my grandfather and uncle, yet also find a way to set down my family's long-borne burden, to steer my way out of the churning turbulence of Alex's wake into the calm and peaceful waters of my living family, my friends, and my life.

It was a beautiful clear evening as our 757 climbed to thirty-nine thousand feet along the eastern seaboard on its navigational path from Washington to Europe. Gazing down over the sprawling boroughs of New York City, I had an unhindered view of the Statue of Liberty and neighboring Ellis Island. My parents had roused themselves at 4:00 a.m. to catch their first glimpse of Miss Liberty welcoming torch when they arrived safely in America in 1941. Alex and Helmut had found the golden door shut firmly against them two years earlier. I pondered those two journeys that I could almost see far below me and the fate that had intervened in both, and as we bent our way east into the gathering night and my latest voyage into that land of mystery we call the past, I recalled the words of Martin Buber: "All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware."

Sachsenhagen

WEDNESDAY, MAY 11, 2011. We land in Switzerland. Writing from Interlachen 120 years earlier, Mark Twain called Switzerland “the cradle of liberty” and enthused that “it is healing and refreshing to breathe air that has known no taint of slavery for six hundred years.” But we grounded our choice of this country as the starting point of our journey more in practicality than idealism. After following my uncle and grandfather for what we assume will be a fairly harrowing venture, we plan to decompress at a splendid old hotel in the Swiss Alps that was a favorite destination of Amy’s uncle, so we choose Zürich as our landing site.

At the airport, we wheel our bags through the maze of corridors and duty-free shops to the rental car counter, where we are given possession of a sleek silver Opel Meriva. My first order of business is to borrow a single strip of adhesive tape from the rental desk, which I use to affix the small photos of Alex and Helmut to a space just above the Meriva’s rearview mirror. With this physical reminder of our journey’s purpose set firmly before us, we are now ready to begin. I note the odometer’s figure of 1,063 kilometers, and we set out into Zürich’s daunting traffic, heading west.

The great Irish writer James Joyce, who left Dublin for good when he was thirty years old, moved to Zürich in 1915 and spent the rest of the Great War there working on his epic retelling of the story of Ulysses, the immortal wanderer. In 1940, Joyce fled Paris in advance of the Nazi invasion and returned to Zürich, where he died in January 1941 of a perforated ulcer. He is buried in Zürich’s Fluntern Cemetery, hard by the city’s zoo. Joyce’s widow, Nora Barnacle, declared of her husband, “He was awfully fond of the lions—I like to think of him lying there and listening to them roar.” On this sunny May morning, we see signs for the zoo but, alternately fighting fatigue and pumping adrenaline, we make our determined way to the Swiss expressway A3, which in turn takes us over the cow-dotted hills and through long winding tunnels toward Basel. Just east of Basel, we cross the legendary River Rhine and enter my ancestral homeland, speeding north.

Our route skirts the edge of the Black Forest, where Alex would take his family on vacations to such lovely spa towns as Baden-Baden and Eisenbach. Every now and then, we spy castles perched precariously yet triumphantly on the brow of jagged hills, reminding us that we are not rolling along a familiar American interstate. We pass Karlsruhe, where my father lived as a young student and where he received his fateful summons to join the *Kulturbund*, and maneuver our way around Frankfurt, where my parents met and first lived together as young musicians in love. Amy, embracing her navigator duties with vigor, announces that the town of Giessen, about fifty kilometers ahead, appears to be a promising destination. We leave the autobahn, creep our way into Giessen, and on only our second attempt, find a perfectly serviceable inn in which to pass the night. We enjoy a light *Abendbrot*, or evening snack, take a brief walk in the farmland on the edge of town, then return to our

inn and fall into bed. It's been a long day and a half since our departure, but we're on the road and very satisfied with our initial progress.

Our first full day in Europe dawns cloudy, and as we resume our way north our view of the countryside occasionally yields to a thick fog. We endure hours of autobahns, with heavy trucks making our plucky little Meriva shiver and vibrate as we maneuver around them and shiny black Audis and Mercedes-Benzes whizzing past us at 150 kph on their hip yet efficient way to Berlin and Leipzig. Finally, a little past noon, we leave the thundering traffic for a more peaceful two-lane highway, which takes us gently to the lovely town of Bückeberg, the site of the official archives of the German state of Lower Saxony. We have arrived in the land of my forebears.

Lower Saxony is the second largest and fourth most populous of the sixteen states of Germany. It covers much of the territory of the ancient Kingdom of Hannover, which has supplied royalty to both Germany and, since the eighteenth century, England. Lower Saxony appeals to me geographically because it borders more neighboring states (nine) than any other German state, in much the same way that my birth state of Missouri borders more states (eight) than any other American state. It's largely agricultural land, producing wheat, potatoes, rye, and poultry, and featuring the sort of sandy soil that fosters grasslands, the raising of cattle, and the breeding of horses. Indeed, the Lower Saxony coat of arms is a red shield on which rears a white Saxon steed. Horses played a large role in my family throughout the nineteenth century, and I've come to Bückeberg, a town about fifteen miles southwest of Alex's birthplace of Sachsenhagen, to learn what I can about how the Goldschmidts lived.

Once the capital city of the tiny municipality of Schaumburg-Lippe, Bückeberg today is within the borders of Schaumburg, a district of Lower Saxony. In 1750, the year Johann Sebastian Bach died, Prince Wilhelm von Schaumburg-Lippe recruited the great man's ninth son, Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach, to come to Bückeberg as court harpsichordist, where he stayed, writing keyboard sonatas, chamber music, symphonies, and oratorios, until his death in 1795. Present-day Bückeberg boasts a helicopter museum containing early drawings of flying machines by Leonardo da Vinci, in addition to forty working helicopters. But our destination on this still-overcast Thursday afternoon is the ornate Bückeberg Palace, a yellow castle with turrets and fountains and gently manicured gardens that for over seven hundred years has been the official residence of the princes of Schaumburg-Lippe. We enter a side tower of the palace, climb stairs past royal red walls hung with portraits of generations of Schaumburg-Lippe royalty, until we come to the archive reading room.

Dr. Hendrick Weingarten of the Bückeberg Archives, with whom I struck up an Internet correspondence some weeks ago, meets us here. He arranges for several immense leather-bound tomes to be brought to us from the dusty depths of the castle holdings. We all stand silently when three aides enter the reading room bearing their burden of books and the many years, lives, and events contained within them. When the hands that wrote these documents passed over the pages and left their trails of ink, human beings still measured distances by how far a horse could pull a carriage in a day, flight was reserved for the winged creatures of the air, the telegraph was the new means of communication, and at night people lit their lives with fire. I am holding a folder of yellowing but still stoutly legible papers contained in a soft blue binder tied together by a forest-green ribbon. And there before me, on a page dated 10 January 1879, is the notice that in the hamlet of Sachsenhagen, on the first day of January in the year one thousand eight hundred seventy-nine at six o'clock in the morning, was delivered to Moses and Auguste Goldschmidt a male baby whose first name was Alexander.

My grandfather, whom I have come all this way to save, has been born.

THE HISTORY OF SACHSENHAGEN goes back to the thirteenth century, when it was a lonely cluster of houses and barns existing in the shadow of a grand moated castle built by the reigning duke of Saxony to secure the countryside from thieves, cutpurses, highwaymen, and other lowlifes of those Dark Ages. It was then a swampy region located along an old trading route running southwest to northeast roughly the same path as today's B65 federal highway. Both castle and hamlet are first mentioned in local chronicles in the year 1253; forty-four years later, in 1297, the castle changed hands as the result of a dispute over an unpaid dowry.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, Sachsenhagen had become a rural center for farmers, merchants, traders, and craftsmen. A great fire swept through its thatched-roofed wooden buildings in 1619, nearly destroying the entire village, sparing only the *Rathaus*, or city hall, and a single tower from the medieval castle. But the town persevered, rebuilt, and on March 1, 1650, was granted the honor of being designated an official *Stadt*, or city, rather than a mere hamlet. It must have been a grand day, full of pomp and pageantry, when Her Highness the Countess Amalie Elizabeth von Hessen signed the royal decree allowing the newly minted city to build its own church, hold three grand market fairs each year, and design and maintain its own coat of arms.

For years, Sachsenhagen belonged to the holdings of Schaumburg-Lippe; then in the mid-seventeenth century, it was annexed by the Hessian principality. Finally, in 1974, it became part of the district of Schaumburg. Today it can boast the honor of being the second-smallest city in all of Lower Saxony, with a population of about two thousand souls.

In the year 1601, while it still languished in hamlet status, Sachsenhagen welcomed into its midst, though admittedly on the outskirts of the settlement, a family by the name of Leffmann, the first recorded Jews to make Sachsenhagen their home. Over time, a small, steady stream of Jewish families flowed into the village, provided that they followed a few regulations. In order to live in Sachsenhagen, at least for the next century, a Jew was required to purchase a letter of safe conduct from the sovereign—a prince of Schaumburg-Lippe or a Hessian count—a letter that had to be renewed regularly. These letters of safe conduct amounted to nothing less than a protection racket for the rulers, providing them a steady income from a population that had learned hard lessons of the perils of an unprotected existence. A Jewish household also considered it prudent to supplement its safe-conduct fee with the occasional additional gift, perhaps a finely wrought saddle or the fruits of a plentiful harvest.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Jews made up about 7 percent of the population of Sachsenhagen; in the census of 1861, of the 695 people living in the village, 52 were Jewish. In 1850, after years of sending their children to Jewish schools in the nearby towns of Rehburg, Hagenburg, and Rodenberg, the elders of Sachsenhagen decided that the distances traveled to those places were too demanding and established their own school. That same 1861 census reveals that the Jewish school in Sachsenhagen taught fourteen young scholars and that they huddled together in a building that measured only twenty feet long, nine feet wide, and ten feet high. The dimensions of the salary the Jewish community was able to offer its teachers were meager as well: fifty thalers per year, though room and board were generously included. Not surprisingly, it proved difficult over the years to attract and retain competent, highly motivated teachers at such wages.

On July 28, 1869, the local newspaper reported on a joyous ceremony in Sachsenhagen, blessed with fine weather and attended by a large and festive crowd, which featured the laying of the foundation stone for the city synagogue. The building was completed and consecrated the following year and was commodious enough to offer space to the Jewish school and living quarters for the

teacher. Life in Sachsenhagen was good for the Jews.

Death had also been provided for. In 1823, the electorate of Hessen issued the following ordinance: “Each synagogue is permitted to have its own cemetery but its layout, enclosure, the time of its burials and the depths of its graves must follow the regulations established by the police. With regard to Jewish cemeteries that already exist, it is expected that their future use will conform in as much as possible to this order.”

A Jewish cemetery had already existed in Sachsenhagen for nearly a century prior to 1823. Though a map of the village dated 1714 shows no sign of one, it appears that within a couple of decades, a graveyard for the Jews had been acquired. Such an acquisition was no routine matter. Land had to be purchased, and for many years European authorities had frowned on selling land to Jews; even when such transactions were allowed, the land that changed hands was often of substandard value, perhaps swampy or riddled with stones, making it unsuitable for agriculture. But the Jews of Sachsenhagen were fortunate: the land purchased for their cemetery, though outside the boundaries of the village, was flat and arable. Hops grew along the edges of the cemetery, and the soil produced sturdy oaks and elms and a healthy hazelnut bush. The oldest surviving headstone in the Jewish cemetery dates from 1787. But the oldest headstone that is marked by both German and Hebrew inscriptions belongs to Levi Goldschmidt. In Hebrew, the text reads, “Here lies a decent and God-fearing man. He was honest and just. He died at age 60.” He was my great-great-grandfather.



The former house number 17, now number 9 Oberestrasse, where my great-great-grandfather Levi lived with his wife Johanna and their “poor man’s cow.”

Levi Goldschmidt was born on July 18, 1799, the son of Jehuda Goldschmidt. Where he was born remains a mystery, although some evidence points south about twenty miles from Sachsenhagen to the town of Hameln. Known as Hamelin in English, it’s the site of the legendary Pied Piper, who rid the town of its plague of mice and rats and then, in revenge for not being paid for his services, rid the town of all its children. When Levi moved to Sachsenhagen is also unclear, but he bought a house there in 1834, at age thirty-five, and married Johanna Frank. Within a very short time, the Goldschmidts were among the most prominent of the Jewish families of Sachsenhagen.

In a registry of assets for the year 1841, Levi and Johanna are listed as living in house number 17 in Sachsenhagen. (At the time, all the town’s houses were simply given numbers, regardless of the street. Today, the address is 9 Oberestrasse, the main thoroughfare through town.) In 1841, the Goldschmidt family’s assets were modest: two fruit trees and a single goat, considered in those days to be “the poor man’s cow.” By comparison, 108 of the 128 families living in Sachsenhagen had

least one cow, including all three of the other Jewish families. By the end of the decade, however, the Goldschmidt family fortune had soared; Levi had become a *Pferdehändler*, a dealer of horses.

As far back as the Middle Ages, European laws prevented Jews from owning land and encouraged them to practice professions that Christians largely avoided. Scriptural strictures against lending money and charging interest led Christians to shun the financial vocations, and thus it fell to the Jews to become bankers and moneylenders. In the nineteenth century, Jews were still barred from journalism, most professorships, and the law. As late as 1905 in Europe, there was little chance that a Jew could become a judge, and even then only if he renounced his faith and converted to Christianity. Although excluded from certain professions, Jews often flourished in those they were allowed to practice, and in the European countryside, they embraced the horse business. In Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the horse trade was largely a Jewish enterprise, and in Germany, most of the prominent suppliers of horses to the well-born and well-connected were Jews. So identified were Jews with the buying and selling of horses that by the 1930s, the rise of National Socialism was accompanied by municipal attempts to expel and ban Jews from the profession.

In much the same way that the automobile dominates our lives in the early twenty-first century, horses were nearly indispensable in the nineteenth. Urban dwellers depended on horse-drawn conveyances for transportation and commerce. In the countryside, farmers relied on horses to plow the earth and transport goods to and from market. In the 1840s, Levi Goldschmidt recognized that there was no dealer of horses in Sachsenhagen, so he stepped into the breach. Within a few years, he had established himself as a reliable judge of horseflesh and a shrewd businessman and was accepted as one of the trusted elders of the village's Jewish community.

Levi was called upon to speak for the community in a dispute involving the Jewish cemetery and a local wheelwright named Georg Buschmann. Not until 1908 was a fence erected around the perimeter of the cemetery, and in 1845 Herr Buschmann began taking a shortcut through the cemetery on his way home. Because the path between the graves was so narrow, the heavy wooden wheels of Buschmann's wagon would often rumble over a gravesite. Naturally enough, the Jewish families considered Buschmann's shortcut an act of desecration and demanded a hearing of the district authorities to force the wheelwright to use the common path around the cemetery. Levi was chosen to represent the Jewish side in the dispute, but after more than two months of arguing and proposing several solutions to the problem, the authorities simply threw up their hands and walked away, leaving the matter as it was. Buschmann's wheels continued to roll through the cemetery.

Within a few years, however, Levi achieved a healthy measure of satisfaction. Herr Buschmann died and, with his business booming, Levi sold his house number 17 and bought the wheelwright's much larger house from Buschmann's widow in 1848. The more spacious home, number 35 on the market square, was a necessary investment; Levi and Johanna had eight children. The eldest was Moses, my great-grandfather, followed by Marianne, Samuel, Ruben, Emma, Hermann, Friederik, and Helene. When he died, Levi's household comprised his wife, their eight children, a maid, and two servants.

The Goldschmidts had achieved remarkable wealth in a short time. The profession of *Pferdehändler* had been good to them, and in turn Great-Great-Grandfather Levi had been good to Sachsenhagen. At the time of his death, on September 17, 1859, in addition to being remembered as decent, honest, and just on his headstone, Levi had acquired a reputation for magnanimity. He had made gifts to the community that amounted to more than the value of his considerable property, which included the market square house and several fields in the countryside.

His widow, Johanna, known also as Hanna or Chana, lived nearly another thirty years. She died

Sachsenhagen on October 15, 1887. The inscription on her headstone in the Jewish cemetery reads, Hebrew, “Here rests a decent and kind woman. Her path was just and charitable. She taught her children the Torah.”

The eldest child, Moses, was born on February 18, 1835, in the house on Oberestrasse. As the first male offspring, Moses was perhaps fated to take over the family business, but he took to it enthusiastically and with quite spectacular results. Demand for horses increased throughout the nineteenth century; in 1850, there were about 2.7 million horses in Germany, and by the end of the century, at the dawn of the age of the horseless carriage, that number had risen to around 4.2 million. Moses’s customers were his neighbors in Sachsenhagen and the surrounding rural communities who needed horses for transportation and farm work, and he also sold horses to the hotels and hackney carriage companies in Stadthagen, Bückeberg, and Hameln that required fine horses for their elegant carriages and to the military for its elite cavalry troops. A good horse might fetch a price of 800 marks, roughly the annual starting salary for an average worker. Several times a year, Moses would travel to Hannover and Hamburg to purchase horses from north German breeders, and occasionally he’d even go abroad in search of a fine steed at a good price. On one such journey, he went north to Denmark where he not only bought three horses but also found a reliable worker named David Larsen whom he brought back to Sachsenhagen as his assistant and right-hand man.

In 1859, the year he turned twenty-four and lost his father, Moses married Auguste Philippsohn, four years his junior and a member of perhaps the most prominent Jewish family in Sachsenhagen. Auguste’s father, Joseph Philippsohn, a successful merchant, had been born in Sachsenhagen in 1811 and could trace his ancestry back to Itzhak Philippsohn, born in the village in 1761. Like his father before him, Moses sired eight children, seven boys and a girl, Bertha, who died in infancy. In time for the birth of their first child, Albert, in 1860, Moses and Auguste moved from the house on the marketplace to a grand house at 94 Mittelstrasse, a place that could boast something only a few other homes could claim, a baker’s oven. On the roof of the house, there were two wooden planks on which early every spring, a pair of storks would build a nest and care for their young throughout the languid days of summer until the whole family would depart in September in search of a winter refuge farther south.

My great-grandfather was a pillar of his community, remembered by his neighbors as a kind, generous man and also something of a character, a “Sachsenhagen original.” Julius Geweke, who was born in Sachsenhagen in 1902, asked his father, a saddler, to recall life in the village in his day: “The horse dealer Moses Goldschmidt lived behind our house, over on Mittelstrasse. Whenever Goldschmidt received a shipment of horses he’d place a notice in the newspaper. And when a potential buyer came by to look at the horses, Goldschmidt would have the animals pranced through the streets of Sachsenhagen, his workhand Larsen trotting along keeping pace. Goldschmidt himself would stand in front of his house, smiling, smoking a big cigar, and cracking his whip smartly. The buyer would watch this parade of horses and then pick one out for closer inspection, looking into its mouth to verify that the animal was of the age advertised. After a bit of wrangling, the deal was sealed with a hearty handshake.”

The family business was not without its conflicts. On January 28, 1884, a dispute between Moses Goldschmidt and a carter named Heine was formally entered into the proceedings of the law courts in Stadthagen. There is no evidence today indicating what the dispute was about, but it took a long time to be resolved. Not until November 5 was a decision rendered, but for Moses, it was apparently worth the wait. The judge ruled in his favor and awarded him the not-inconsiderable sum of 350 marks.

The grand house at 94 Mittelstrasse was filled with not only the children of Moses and Auguste

but four servants as well, who slept next door at 93 Mittelstrasse. They were the butler Fritz Wieb, the valet Johann Wiltgreve, the housekeeper Fanny Schwarz, and the maid Luise Meuter. There was nearly always a fire burning in the big oven, keeping the house comfortably warm in the winter. And the Jewish holidays were always observed.

Into these secure and prosperous surroundings my grandfather, Alex, was delivered on New Year's Day 1879, the seventh of Moses and Auguste's children. On the same day, in London, the noted writer E. M. Forster was born. That year would also witness the births of Albert Einstein, Wallace Stevens, Ethel Barrymore, Will Rogers, and Joseph Stalin. And on the very last day of 1879, in Menlo Park, New Jersey, Thomas Edison would demonstrate incandescent lighting to the public for the first time.

Thirteen months later, on February 2, 1880, Auguste gave birth to her eighth child and seventh son, Carl Goldschmidt. He may have been one child too many. On November 7, 1881, Auguste died, at age forty-two. On her headstone in the Jewish cemetery in Sachsenhagen are the words, in Hebrew, "Here rests an admired woman, the crown of her husband and children. She was modest and traveled the way of peace."

So my grandfather lost his mother when he was only two. I like to think that his large family cushioned the blow somewhat, even though his oldest sibling, brother Albert, was nineteen years his senior. Alex was quite close to his two immediate brothers, Max, four years older, and Carl, and the three of them attended classes every day at the Jewish school in the synagogue. In 1889, when Alex was ten, a superintendent from Kassel, one of the largest cities in the Hessian principality, paid a visit and filed a report stating that the Jewish school in Sachsenhagen currently was teaching only five pupils and that three of them were Goldschmidts: Max, Alex, and Carl. The superintendent declared that with such minuscule attendance, there was little reason to keep the school open. Within two years it closed its doors and the three young Goldschmidts began to attend the main public school in Sachsenhagen, arriving immediately after the morning religious class.

Despite the success of his father's business, Alex had no desire to be a horse dealer. Instead, after staying in Sachsenhagen long enough to earn his *Abitur* degree (roughly equivalent to two years of college), he turned his back on his rural upbringing and moved northwest to Lower Saxony's fourth largest city, Oldenburg, in 1906. He was twenty-seven years old. Perhaps it was just a coincidence that his first apartment in Oldenburg looked out on the city's *Pferdemarkt*, or horse market.

Two years later, just before midnight on April 15, 1908, Moses Goldschmidt died, at the age of seventy-three. Alex and his six brothers gathered for the funeral. Given the resources at hand, it could have been a lavish affair. At the time of his death, *Pferdehändler* Goldschmidt's assets were estimated at 76,500 German marks. It's not an exact reckoning, but in 1913, just five years later, a mark was valued at around four American dollars, making his estate worth approximately \$306,000 . . . in 1908. Given the rate of inflation over the past century, when Moses Goldschmidt died, his total net worth exceeded 7 million in today's dollars. He was by far the wealthiest man in Sachsenhagen and possibly for miles around. The equine occupation had been a runaway, some might say galloping, success.

But death comes for rich and poor alike. His headstone reads, in Hebrew, "Here lies Moses Goldschmidt, a god-fearing man. He loved justice and followed the road of righteousness. He fed the hungry. He died on a Thursday, the first day of Pesach 5668."

THURSDAY, MAY 12, 2011. "*Hier ruht unser lieber Vater Moses Goldschmidt, geb. d. 18. Febr. 1833, gest. d. 15. April 1908,*" I read aloud to Amy. "Here rests our dear Father Moses Goldschmidt . . .," I translate from the German side of the headstone. We are standing beneath two tall, graceful trees

within the boundaries of the Jewish cemetery in Sachsenhagen on a late afternoon that is turning windy and increasingly cloudy.

Earlier today, after several fruitful hours in the archives of Bückeburg Palace, we returned to our little Meriva and motored across the flat farmland of Lower Saxony along the ancient trade thoroughfare that is now federal highway B65. We drove into the city of Stadthagen and thence on country road L445 through fields of rye and over a small canal, until we reached the southern edge of Sachsenhagen. I was here once before, twelve years ago, on the dire date of November 9 in the company of my brother. We'd had the devil's own time finding the cemetery, which is tucked off the road, securely away from view, but with my memory of its location clear in my mind's unshakable GPS system, I was confident I could find it this time. But there was a glitch in the wiring, and finding the humble graveyard again took several attempts.

Now that we've found it, I note that, as in 1999, the cemetery looks ragged, overgrown, and somewhat neglected. The iron fence that surrounds the place sags here and there, the grass is high, and weeds flourish amid the graves, which seem randomly scattered about. The exceptions, however, are the families Philippsohn and Goldschmidt. My family's headstones are standing side by side, with Levi on the far left and Moses on the far right, with Johanna and Auguste resting between them.

It is a profound and unsettling place, and as the wind freshens and the clouds thicken in the late afternoon sky, I am deeply conscious of my vastly diminished family, the loss of Peter is still keen and aching, and yet here are sturdy and lasting memorials to what was once a thriving, prosperous clan of Goldschmidts on whom fortune smiled. As linden branches toss overhead, I try to imagine these long-dead family members, conjuring with the concept that, should the impossible occur and should we somehow meet face to face, there would be a moment akin to looking into a mirror, of noticing with a start a familiar feature, an eyebrow, an ear, the curve of a lip or the curl of hair, a "Hey, don't you know you?" moment of mysterious yet joyful recognition that I find at this time and in this place so overwhelming. I miss my family terribly, those both recently and long departed, and I hug my remaining family, Amy, tightly.

As we turn to leave the cemetery, we notice amid the ragged grass two long parallel depressions in the ground running the length of the graveyard from south to north. They are, we learn later, the ghostly tracks of the heavy wooden wheels of that cart driven so long ago by Georg Buschmann.

Sachsenhagen is too small to sustain a proper hotel, so we drive our Meriva back to Stadthagen where we've reserved a room in the Gerbergasse, a former tannery. By now the clouds have produced a steady rain, which adds its note of solemnity to the atmosphere. But the next morning arrives with abundant sunshine, and we return to Sachsenhagen eagerly anticipating new discoveries.

For weeks, ever since plans for my journey began to take solid shape, I have been in e-mail contact with Theodor Beckmann, a member of Sachsenhagen's historical society. He has sent me a great deal of information, always in the kindest manner imaginable. I am grateful for his assistance and also for his excellent English. Despite several years of high school German and many trips to the country, my German has never advanced beyond the barely serviceable stage. So I was sorry to learn a week or so ago that on this particular Friday the 13th, Herr Beckmann would be in France with his wife. His very able colleague, Erika Sembdner, would meet us instead; alas, her English proves to be no better than my German.

But her pleasure at our arrival seems unbounded. We ask for her at the *Rathaus*, and she immediately hurries from her house to greet us. For the next ninety minutes, Erika leads us on a sentimental journey through Sachsenhagen. First she shows us 9 Oberrestrasse, the house where Great-Grandfather Levi lived with Johanna, their two fruit trees, and a single goat. The imposing

white house with its high sloping roof is situated directly on the main road that leads south toward the cemetery. We then visit the grand house on Mittelstrasse where Great-Grandfather Moses lived from 1864 until his death in 1908. Erika tells us that it's among the oldest houses in Sachsenhagen and has been expertly restored. Built by a master carpenter in the seventeenth century, not long after the great fire, it's a stunning example of the traditional *fachwerk* style, in which heavy wooden beams are fastened together by mortise and tenon joints. Such ancient grandeur. And it belonged to my family. Amy and I stand silently, amazed.

Erika then leads us to a small building just off the market square. Here the Sachsenhagen synagogue and Jewish school once stood, from its gladsome dedication in 1870 until the night of November 9, 1938, when it and countless other *shuls* across Germany were plundered and set afire during the orgy of violence known as *Kristallnacht*. Today the land is occupied by a private house and garden. In 1885, when Grandfather Alex was six years old and attending the Jewish school, there were 58 Jews living in Sachsenhagen, a number that represented 7 percent of the total population of 840. In 1939, in the wake of *Kristallnacht*, the Jewish percentage of the citizenry still measured 8 percent, 80 of 1,089. But then on July 20, 1942, the Gestapo ordered Jewish citizens of Sachsenhagen out of their homes and told them to assemble in the market square. They were rounded up, placed in secure trucks and deported to the East. None of them returned. Today, the Jewish population of Sachsenhagen is zero.

As I sadly ponder this grim statistic, Erika says brightly, "*Jetzt besuchen wir die Schule,*" and herds us back to our car. Following her directions, we drive about a mile to Sachsenhagen's only primary school. We arrive shortly after lunchtime and the grounds and play areas are nearly empty. Erika walks with us into a cheerful red-brick entranceway that declares in brass letters that we have arrived at the Gerda Philippsohn School.



Today there are no more Jews living in my ancestral home of Sachsenhagen, but the village school is named for a Jewish girl who was murdered at Auschwitz in 1942. Amy and I were welcomed as near celebrities.

Gerda Philippsohn, born in Sachsenhagen in 1927, began attending school in 1933. She was an eager learner and bright student. On the afternoon of November 15, 1938, six days after *Kristallnacht*, she was summarily dismissed from the school because she was a Jew. On March 28, 1942, Gerda, her parents, and eleven other Sachsenhagen Jews were deported. At age fifteen, Gerda was murdered at Auschwitz.

In 2000, at the urging of former teacher Rita Schewe, the school changed its name to the Gerda

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