

WHAT THEY DIDN'T BURN

.....
Uncovering My Father's Holocaust Secrets

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INTRODUCTION

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They burned his younger sister and her two-year-old daughter. They burned his half-brothers and their families. They burned his uncles and their wives. They murdered the sister's husband. He probably wasn't burned but dumped into a shallow mass grave in the hills above a small village in western Poland.

When they couldn't burn any more people, they set about burning the records and documents to hide their sins. What they didn't burn was a paper trail that tracked the man's journey through ghettos, slave labor, concentration camps, death marches, and more. They didn't burn the hidden records that revealed surprising and painful incidents he had never talked about—at least not to me, his son.

It's not that my father, Josef "Dolek" Lajtner, never told me stories about the war; he did, many of them. As a child, we'd snuggle together on the green living room armchair with the tassels—"Daddy's chair"—as he spoke of survival and escape from Hitler-and-the-Nazis, a phrase always uttered as a single malignant noun. The war was less than ten years past, my father's recollections fresh and detailed. His stories ended with the same moral: *So you see son, in the end it didn't matter if you had money or not, were smart or dumb. Life was worth nothing—absolutely nothing. You needed luck.*

Because of this reservoir of stories, I knew with the certainty of youth that I knew everything worth knowing about Hitler-and-the-Nazis—the camps, the struggle to survive, that life or death was a coin toss. I never felt a need or curiosity to explore beyond some popular war movies of the period. I never read memoirs by Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi or even *The Diary of Anne Frank* until well into my adult years, and only then because my daughters were assigned them for school and I felt obliged to know what they were talking about.

Only decades later, only after uncovering the documents they didn't burn, did I realize I had learned more about the Holocaust from Hollywood than from all of my father's stories.

After Dad's death, and especially after my mother's passing seven years later, I felt their stories fading like family snapshots in a shoebox. Our children may know who they are, intellectually. However, they will never speak Yiddish, the lingua franca of my parents' generation. They will never have a Grandpa Joe or a Grandma Helen as links to a world long gone. Something very important was being lost.

When my young daughters and nieces asked about the grandfather they had never met, I would recount Grandpa Joe stories that came to mind in the moment. I had been a reporter for some twenty years and prided myself on knowing how to spin a story. The children listened politely, asked a question or two, and reliably proclaimed the story "amazing." Yet doubts nagged: Did the story really stick? Would it be remembered, if at all, more as family fable than family fact? Though but one generation removed, was I one generation too far to recapture the poignant humanity, the essential truth of my father's calm, measured voice?

As a former journalist, I knew that relying on my memories of my father's remembered stories could never pass any sniff test of Reporting 101. Where was the corroboration, the proof, the facts?

The truth was, I had no facts, only memories of facts. I could tell my daughters no more because I knew no more. I had been repeating my father's vague vignettes in a vacuum.

Like my father, every Holocaust survivor has an amazing story. If they didn't, they wouldn't have survived. Yet if the stories sound too amazing, they risk being dismissed as exaggerations, or worse. How will their stories be remembered by future generations further and further removed from the war?

As I exhumed the documents they didn't burn from archives in Poland, Germany, France, Israel, and Washington, a gradual realization imposed a somber discipline I had not anticipated.

From the most unlikely of sources—the Nazis themselves—the documents corroborate not only a man's chronology but also the chronologies of his camp comrades, those who survived and those who did not.

These yellowing papers demanded respect. For mixing the warm memories of my father's stories with cold facts from these documents risked yielding a tepid brew that satisfied neither the soul nor the intellect. Still, I would have to resist the urge to dramatize the undramatic, insinuate significance into the insignificant, draw sharp conclusions from vague evidence, or, conversely, ignore hard evidence in favor of facts I might reasonably presume to improve the narrative.

Chapter 1

WEST 83RD STREET

The only time I heard anyone call my father a bastard was about a month after he died.

I was in an open-air café overlooking the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem, sipping iced coffee and eating apple cake with Walter Spitzer, my father’s old artist friend from the days before, during, and after “the camps.”

Walter had flown in from Paris for business and had brought his daughter along to see the Holy Land. I was a reporter for NBC News and had returned from Dad’s funeral in New York a couple of weeks earlier, still abraded and raw from his unexpected death.

Walter smiled when I pulled out my reporter’s Sony cassette recorder.

To his daughter: “So he wants to know how his father survived.”

To me: “I’ll tell you how. Dolek was a bastard. A real bastard. You had to be if you wanted to live.”

I was stunned, and it showed. This wasn’t the quintessential type-B father of my childhood. That man was thoughtful and considerate, patient and gentle.

Walter cut off my stuttering protests with a laugh. “Dolek was a smuggler, a great smuggler—he smuggled everything.”

In the forced labor camps, the Germans would appoint a Jew as *Judenälteste*, roughly the Jewish Elder or Senior Jew, charged with maintaining order inside the wire with his own staff. Walter said a German guard had caught my father with a bottle of schnapps he had just traded with a Pole. The guard dragged Dad to the *Judenälteste*. “The German tells him, ‘Look, this is the man you are protecting—making business, black business, black-market business.’

“The *Judenälteste* screams at Dolek, ‘You son of a bitch. I protect you and you do this to me?’ And he punches your father, right-left-right. Knocks him down. Then he gives him a big shtup [kick] in his ass. ‘Get out of my sight or I’ll kill you.’ He keeps kicking and screaming. Dolek crawls away on his hands and knees. And the SS man was happy to see this, a Jew beating another Jew.”

Walter paused for a sip of iced coffee, but really for dramatic effect. “And that’s how he saved your father’s life.”

“Saved?” I ask.

“Yes, of course. Otherwise the German would have killed Dolek like a fly. Is this not great? Fantastic, no?”

By now I’m a little off balance. My father never mentioned this incident. Evidently there was more to Dad’s stories than he ever let on. What else didn’t I know? I wanted to find out more. Why else bring my reporter’s tape recorder to the meeting? But the wound of his sudden death was still too fresh, too painful. It would need to heal some before I began picking at those scabs. I put the Spitzer cassette into an old wooden humidior I used to store trinkets and memorabilia, promising myself I’d get back to it. It was a promise that took twenty years to keep.

Though Walter Spitzer couldn’t have known it, he—more precisely, his art—had insidiously infected my life at a very young age.

As a child, our family lived in a rent-controlled apartment building next to a parking garage on West 83rd Street in

Manhattan. Friends from the old country would note with sly humor that my parents were the first “greenhorns” among them to move into a building with a functioning elevator.

The central hub of the apartment was a small square dining room with doorways or windows on three sides. That left only one wall large enough to hold art and only one piece of artwork on that wall, a dark brooding pastel that dominated the room. It was drawn by Walter Spitzer in 1946.

It was a ghetto scene of an old Hassidic Jew with his son. Each man has a yellow star on the breast of his dark frock coat. Each hugs a red prayer shawl bag under his arm. Glancing anxiously over their shoulders, in the distance they spy a jackbooted figure in paramilitary green with arms raised approaching an elderly Jewish couple. There is deep terror in the old man’s eyes.

That drawing always hung on the most prominent wall in the most prominent room of every apartment in which we lived. It haunted me. It fascinated me. It was as much a part of my childhood reality as television. It catalyzed many a story on my father’s knee.

Like Dad, his friends were all survivors and immigrants. Beryl worked in a grocery, Jack moved furniture, Charlie installed telephones, and Sam sold sheets and towels out of the back of his Oldsmobile in the days before credit cards were invented. My father was a presser of men’s suits at a factory on Manhattan’s far West Side.

They were modest men closing in on middle age. Shoulders rounded, faces creased, eyes searching, warily searching, even when they smiled. They spoke English with thick Polish accents, though none thicker than Dad’s. They wore cheap brown suits and patterned shirts and ties knotted to the neck, even on Sundays.

Like his friends, Dad had married a tough Eastern European woman who had also survived the war, albeit with losses and, hence, had no tolerance for bullshit. Unlike his friends, though,

he married a woman twelve years younger, Henci, a hot-tempered Magyar, a Hungarian, so very different in disposition than the retiring, cerebral father of childhood memory.

The friends sat around our red-and-gray Formica dining table with the chrome legs, chain-smoked Kents or Camels, sipped cold Ballantines from cans in summer or hot tea from steaming glasses in winter. They spoke in a lilting, singsong Yiddish. They talked of the old country and old acquaintances, of new lives and new families here in America.

On the Formica table there was always a white bakery box with cheese Danish and another full of rainbow cookies. With our parents egging us on, we kids picked out our favorites. Mine was the yellow cookie with the candied cherry on top.

There was much laughter and mirth in that small dining room. Once in a while, though, even a child of seven could detect a somber mood descend like the blue-gray cigarette smoke wafting over the table. Those men and women were their own support group long before the term was coined.

Conversation inevitably gave way to nickel-and-dime games of seven-card knock rummy for the women and more serious rounds of poker for the men, where pots could reach three, four, or even five dollars.

Except for Dad. He didn't play. When the red and blue Tally-Ho decks came out he quietly retired to another room with his *Reader's Digest* or Yiddish newspaper. When Mom berated him for this antisocial behavior, he'd mutter "I've gambled enough in my life" and end the debate.

We kids grew up fluent in Yiddish and the uniqueness of our parents' past. Like the faded blue numbers on Dad's arm, it was rarely discussed or acknowledged. Inside, we knew. Our parents were different not because of what they were—immigrants with accents—but who they were, survivors, the "S" always capitalized in our consciousness, the meaning self-evident. To me, this awareness was just there—a birthmark, not a birth defect.

Years went by. Families grew up. Friendships grew apart. When the old friends did meet, the suits fit better, the faces were fuller, the eyes more content, though the men still wore knotted neckties on Sundays.

Tzu mir, ales kimpl tze shpait, Dad would sigh, To me, everything comes too late. I never asked; I just assumed there would be time to question him at length and make sense of his stories. Then Dad suffered that fatal heart attack and it was too late for me, too. Joseph “Dolek” Laytner died at the age of seventy-three, four months before my brother and his wife could present him with his first grandchild.

By then I was a reporter in Jerusalem seven time zones away. The first call, my brother Alan says Dad suffered a heart attack and is resting in the cardiac unit at Mt. Sinai Hospital. *Dad? But Mom has the heart problems.* Alan’s not sure if I should come home. *Bullshit.* I arrange to return immediately. The second call, after two hours: Dad’s in bad shape. Come home quick. The third, about a lifetime later, from my Uncle Ari. “I’m sorry, boy. He’s gone.”

A gray numbness tasting of ash displaced the adrenalized dread of the past hours. I slumped into my wife Anat’s embrace. *What do I do? How should I feel? How should I act?*

I remembered my father’s last hug goodbye six months ago in the doorway of his apartment. He held me close and tight and sobbed, and I said, “Don’t worry, Pop, we’ll see each other next spring.”

I remembered *Finita la commedia*. I was in high school and we were walking home after a condolence call to a neighbor. Holding his hand out, palm up, he announced, “One day you’re here, a heart attack”—flipping the palm over—“and you’re gone. *Finita la commedia*, the farce is over.”

I remembered Dad telling me that before the war, a pious Jew in Europe would arrange to have a small sack of earth from Jerusalem placed in the casket so the head would rest for eternity on holy soil.

This is what I did after I remembered: I drove with Anat through the dark empty streets of Arab East Jerusalem, up a steep hill in the A'Tur neighborhood to the Mount of Olives cemetery. This is where Zachariah and Absalom and the righteous have been buried for three thousand years, a bona fide holy place where pilgrim buses line up during the day but where now, on this cool April night, the cemetery was pitch dark.

I told Anat to keep the car doors locked and the motor running because, even though it was safe, perfectly safe, you're always cautious about driving with yellow Israeli license plates at night into this isolated part of East Jerusalem.

I squeezed through a loosely chained fence, down terraced rows of flat limestone graves glowing pale white in the reflected starlight. From between tombstones, I scraped fistfuls of gravelly soil into a plastic sandwich baggie. Later, in the taxi to the airport for my 1:00 a.m. flight to New York, I smiled at the irony, that the head of my proudly agnostic father would rest on some of the holiest dirt in Judaism.

The funeral fell on a Sunday. The largest chapel in the Riverside Funeral Home on Amsterdam Avenue was packed to standing room with family, old friends, and many newer acquaintances who had known Joe only as the owner of a neighborhood candy store and then a linen shop for the last twenty-four years. Our parents' inner circle sat in rows close behind my mother, my brother Alan, and our wives.

My eulogy opened by noting that Dad was being buried on April 21, 1985, exactly forty years to the day that he had escaped a death march from a concentration camp in Germany. I often wonder about this coincidence.

At the cemetery, the grave was filled the traditional way—by friends and family taking turns with shovels—as Mom, Alan, and I stood by and watched. The hollow clunk of sod striking the pine coffin ricochets in my heart to this day. *Finita la commedia.*

The Orthodox religious traditions continued for the shiva,

the seven days of official mourning, at my parents' rent-controlled apartment. Mirrors had been covered immediately after Dad's death. We wore torn shirts to symbolize bereavement, sat on low stools to accept condolences, and ate only food brought by family and friends. At least ten adult males gathered early mornings and late afternoons so Alan and I could chant the *Kaddish*, the prayer for the departed, within a *minyan*, a religious quorum.

I stayed on in New York for another week. Alan and my father had been working together in the family business for many years now and had grown close—much closer than I ever could, two continents and a career away. I volunteered to go through Dad's clothes while Mom and Alan were out.

From the inside pocket of Dad's sports jacket, the one he had been wearing when he was rushed to the hospital, I pulled out a creased snapshot of Schlep, our German shepherd mutt who had died a few years earlier. Until that moment I had kept it pretty much together, acting the role of Eldest Son and Older Brother. Seeing the photo, I broke down and sobbed loud and long and pressed the gray herringbone to my face to inhale Dad's lingering smell.

We donated most of his clothes to charity. Alan and I split the silk ties. The shoes were especially tough. Every scuff, crease, and fold of the leather was uniquely our father's. I cannot remember how we disposed of them. I did keep, and still wear, the short navy-blue wool robe I had given Dad for Father's Day years before.

It was later that month that Walter Spitzer called my father a bastard.

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After Mom died some years later, I laid claim to the Spitzer ghetto picture and, as the eldest son, became the designated repository of Dad's war stories including the oft-repeated family favorite about Dad and Bill Ball.

Both had been forced laborers at a giant oil refinery in Germany. Only Bill was a British POW who wore proper khakis

and received food packages from the Canadian Red Cross. My father was a concentration camp inmate in striped pajamas on starvation rations.

Contact between POWs and Jews was strictly forbidden and stringently enforced. Bill Ball nevertheless did something truly extraordinary for my father. Under the Geneva Convention, POWs could write postcards home. Bill Ball used this privilege to instead send a postcard to my father's family in Brooklyn, where Dad's sister had immigrated many years before the war. Because of censorship, my father said the card could only say something like, "Doing as well as can be expected. My mate Joe is still with me." That postcard was the only word Dad's family had between 1939 and 1945 that he was alive.

As my daughters evolved into teenagers, they began asking questions: Where did this happen? Did Grandpa Joe meet Bill Ball after the war? What happened to the postcard? They said, "You ought to write about this." I thought, *Yeah, but it would have to be fiction because confirming the facts would be impossible.*

That suited me just fine. I'd been out of journalism for almost two decades. I was a father of three and lived a suburban life complete with dog, cockatiel, and a red Sears barbeque in the backyard. I had joined my brother in the family's expanding retail business and had prospered in an acceptable middle-class sort of way. I learned to like it well enough and it paid the bills a lot easier than the news business. Still, it never gave me the creative rush it did for my brother.

Bill Ball and the postcard story seemed a good way to get back to writing. All I needed was some context, some details about time and place. From among the trinkets and memorabilia in the old wooden humidor, I retrieved the Sony audio cassette marked Walter Spitzer, recorded twenty years earlier as we sipped iced coffee and ate apple cake in that open-air café, overlooking the Western Wall, in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Chapter 2

FINDING BILL BALL

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My search for Bill Ball begins with the name of the camp my father talked about. I turn to my computer and type, “Blechamer.”

Google asks, “Did you mean blechhammer?” I frown. I click. Up comes the first ten of fifty-two thousand one hundred entries. I learn that Blechhammer was the name of twin refinery complexes each larger than New York’s Central Park and built by some forty thousand workers. It was also the name of a nearby *Zwangsarbeitslager fur Juden*, a forced labor camp for Jews that supplied up to four thousand slave workers to the refinery.

On April 1, 1944, the camp came under the administrative control of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp, about thirty-five miles to the southeast. One website listed Blechhammer under its “Forgotten Camps” category. “The first 3,056 male prisoners of Blechhammer have tattoos of the Auschwitz numbers 176512 to 179567—”

I remember my father’s tattoo was 177-something.

Ransacking old photo albums I find a snapshot with his left arm exposed. A magnifying glass reveals the faded blue numbers: 177904.

The site also says that two thousand British POWs worked at the refineries.

In less than five minutes, I've confirmed that my father had indeed been in Blechhammer and could have interacted with British POWs there.

I reach out to relatives around the country to ask if they recalled anything about a postcard from a British POW during the war. None do. Instead, I get intriguing tidbits about Dad.

An older cousin in Florida emails that the only story she remembers is "how he got a bag of diamonds from an old Belgian Jew, whom your dad took care of, giving him some extra bread & water since the man was dying of typhoid fever. He told your dad where he had buried a bag of diamonds & then died."

My father had mentioned diamonds in a couple of his stories, but I was too young to think of asking how he got them. I file the email away.

An unexpected lead comes from the keeper of our family tree, Cousin Avi in Los Angeles. "The US Holocaust Museum website has a link to an Auschwitz database of prisoner registrations," he writes. "Your dad's name shows up there (you probably know this) and his 'arrest' date is given as sometime in June 1943."

I didn't know. I had surfed the museum's website many times but found nothing of specific interest. I search it again, for hours. No luck. I reach out to researchers at the museum's Survivors' Registry. They sound dubious but agree to help.

I am also still looking for Bill Ball, the British POW. All I remember is Dad saying he was big and ruddy-faced and his name was Bill Ball . . . or was it Bill Bell? Maybe it was Bill Baird. Dad said he was a Scotsman. Or perhaps Australian . . . but he was definitely a POW. How hard can it be?

At least six POW subcamps fed labor to the Blechhammer refineries. POWs were shifted from one subcamp to another and rotated back to the main POW camp, Stalag VIII B. More than one

hundred thousand POWs passed through Stalag VIII B during the war. Some were repatriated as part of prisoner exchanges. Tracking down a single POW will be a lot tougher than I had imagined.

On the internet, many POWs recounted their own captivity. Occasionally, one mentioned the Jewish prisoners. “We thought that all the Jews in Blechhammer were destroyed,” said Ray Corbett from Scotland. “You could see them fading away as the weeks went by and then they would suddenly disappear. I would say virtually worked to death.”

There are also firsthand stories from Jewish survivors of Blechhammer. Some recall incidents so similar to my father’s stories that I imagine both men side by side witnessing the same event—the sickly-sweet smell of bodies incinerating in the camp’s crematorium, or the hanging of a prisoner for some minor infraction of the rules.

The internet leads me to Yale University’s Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. Of its four thousand four hundred survivor testimonials, I get only forty-three hits for Blechhammer on its online database. It’s 2005, and the VHS tapes cannot be viewed online.

On a crisp, clear Friday in October, some two months into my quest, I am at Yale’s majestically Gothic Sterling Memorial Library in New Haven when it opens to view six tapes on reserve.

I had picked the first tape because the online synopsis promises accounts of day-to-day life in Blechhammer. It was recorded in 1982 by Sigmund Walder, then a sixty-one-year-old wholesale jeweler in North Haven, Connecticut.

Tinted aviator glasses mask Sigmund Walder’s eyes. Iron-gray hair brushes his temples and his then-fashionable sideburns. In clipped, German-accented English he recounts his family history in pedantic, mind-numbing detail. My eyes glazing over, I scan the three-page summary of the tape folded into the VHS box. At the last line of the last page is a notation: “Knows Walter Spitzer, artist in France.”

I sit up straight, now fully engaged. *If this man knew Walter . . .*

One hour and twelve minutes into the tape, Sigmund reaches behind his chair and pulls out a portrait Walter drew of him in 1946. It's Sigmund during the war, emaciated and bedraggled in blue-and-gray striped inmate pajamas. My heart skips. I remember a similar portrait Walter did of my gaunt and hollow-eyed father. It was never displayed but remained wrapped in a closet. Somewhere between the apartment moves after my parents' deaths the drawing had disappeared.

Driving home, Friday evening traffic on I-95 South moves like a broken snake. I barely notice, or care. Could I have so easily stumbled on someone who knew Dad at Blechhammer? Was this man still alive?

It's still dark Sunday morning when I wake my computer and google "Sigmund Walder, North Haven, CT."

Four hours and hundreds of page views later, his name appears on a posting about a 2002 art exhibit in Sarasota, Florida, "The Last Expression: Art in Auschwitz." Walder had brought his Spitzer portrait to the exhibit. I quickly find a phone number for a Sigmund Walder in nearby Longboat Key.

The accented voice from the Yale videotape answers on the first ring.

"Hello?"

I identify myself and ask for Sigmund Walder.

"Speaking."

I say, "I've been researching Blechhammer and viewed your testimony at Yale, and in it you showed a painting by Walter Spitzer."

"Yes, Walter's a dear friend."

"My father was a very close friend of Walter's and—"

"Dolek Lajtner?"

My chest constricts like I've been stiff-armed. None but my father's "old country" friends knew him by his Polish nickname.

"Yes," I breathe.

“Well, yes, I knew him but let me think a moment. It’s been sixty years since I last thought about that name.”

I remind Sigmund that Dad was a welder.

“Yes, it’s coming back to me now,” he says, and tells me of another survivor, Mark Beck, who had been a welder at Blechhammer and now also lives in Longboat Key. “I bet Mark might have known your dad.”

Sigmund also has been in regular touch with Walter Spitzer in France. I had assumed Walter, like my father, was long gone. The last time we had talked was two decades ago in that Jerusalem café.

Sigmund offers to phone Mark Beck for me. After we hang up, I sit there numb, staring at the telephone. When I started in journalism, my biggest technological challenge was finding a working pay phone. The first IBM PC was nine years away. Now, in just four hours, I have tracked down a man—not a celebrity or politico but the commonest of common citizens—over a gap of twenty-three years and more than a thousand miles.

Soon, Sigmund calls back. Mark Beck remembers my father as a fellow welder. Mark has phoned his cousin in Los Angeles who had also been at Blechhammer and remembers my father well.

I barely control my glee. What began as one possible lead to my father’s past has now become four eyewitnesses—Sigmund, Mark Beck, Mark’s cousin, and the still-alive Walter Spitzer.

For the next half hour, Sigmund talks about Blechhammer, the war, and survival in his slow, pedantic pace as I type notes into my computer. After immigrating to the United States, Sigmund avoided contact with other survivors and chose to live in suburban Connecticut instead of New York City, with its large Jewish population.

“I separated myself from this life,” he says, “or even from the afterlife if you want, the postwar life, the post-Holocaust life, the post-concentration camp, and even the survivors, most of whom, or many of whom, remained in close contact with their own.”

There were two synagogues in Sigmund's North Haven neighborhood, one whose membership was predominantly American born, the other made up of European refugee émigrés. "And when we decided to join the temple, we did not join this temple. We joined a temple of American Jews, who were born here."

Only decades later, outraged by revisionist historians who denied the Holocaust had ever happened, did Sigmund give testimony to Yale. He also became a trained volunteer and helped other survivors to do the same.

Sigmund asks why I'm chasing my father's stories now, twenty years after his death. I tell him about my search for this British POW named Bill Ball or Bill Bell, who could have been a Scot or a—

"No, Bill was Canadian," Sigmund says. "I knew him well. I remember the maple leaf on his uniform."

I tell Sigmund the postcard story.

"He was a great guy," Sigmund says. "He helped me a lot. He helped a lot of us."

"And this is Bill Ball?" I ask.

"Well, I don't remember his last name, if I ever knew it. We all knew him as Bill. He escaped," Sigmund says. "This was in late '44, in fall of '44. I remember the day like today. There was still some snow on the ground, the sun was shining, and we were walking to the worksite, and coming in the opposite direction were the two guys that I knew, and I believe one of them was Bill, in civilian clothes. We made eye contact . . . I made no motion whatsoever that I knew them."

After we hang up, I join my family for a late Sunday breakfast.

"I'm going to Florida," I announce.

"When?" my wife asks.

"Soon, very soon. These guys aren't going to be around forever."

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Turns out, Sigmund Walder and Mark Beck barely knew my father, if at all.

They pick me up at Sarasota Airport, across the bay from Longboat Key on Florida's Gulf Coast. It's December and snowing in New York. Florida is bathed in warm sunshine.

I recognize Sigmund from the Yale video recorded twenty-three years earlier. At eighty-four, he is debonair in a navy-blue blazer and open-collar dress shirt, though his eyes are somewhat watery with age.

Standing next to him, Mark Beck looks solidly built for his eighty-four years—stocky, with a thick neck, sloped shoulders, and a widow's peak of thinning gray hair. His short-sleeved shirt reveals a line of blue numbers tattooed on the back of his left arm.

Mark clasps my hand in both of his. "You know a lot of the kids these days don't really want to know about what their parents endured—I mean the details. So the parents don't talk about it."

Mark's voice startles me. It could have been my father talking: same thick Polish accent, same deliberate cadence, like he was translating from Yiddish in his head before saying the words out loud in English.

Sigmund drives us to Longboat Key in a large Mercedes sedan. This surprises me. Most survivors I know, certainly all my parents' friends, would no more drive a German car than put their tongue on the third rail of the subway. I let the issue pass without question or comment.

We arrive at a restaurant overlooking one of Longboat Key's many marinas. It's a starched-white-tablecloth kind of place where busboys offer grated Parmesan and green olive oil to go with the warm focaccia. The food is good—so good that any talk of concentration camps or slave labor seems inappropriate. Only over coffee and dessert do I take out my digital recorder and ask my hosts how they knew my father.

Sigmund explains he had worked as an electrician in the refinery's *betriebskontrolle*, the operations control center, alongside Canadian POWs. This gave him virtually unlimited opportunities for black-market trading. However, Sigmund cannot recall any specific incident about my father.

Sigmund turns testy when I ask how he knew my father's name. "I believe now that your dad had contacts with us upstairs, which is why I know his name. How else would I know 'Dolek'? Come on!"

I turn to Mark Beck.

"I think I remember your dad when we carried cylinders [of acetylene and oxygen] we used for welding."

That's it.

I had steeled myself not to expect much. After all, I'm asking two octogenarians to recall encounters from sixty years ago. Yet I hoped for more than "I believe" and "I think."

They see my disappointment.

Mark leans in across the table. "Listen: In Blechhammer I never really focused on anybody. What somebody did was *his* business, not *my* business. My business was my brother and my father—and myself. Nobody cared about anybody else. And nobody cared about me. And you really didn't want to make any relationship because tomorrow the person was dead. Then you would grieve. It's no way—you were in a jungle—it's no way to live."

As Mark speaks, I flash back to something my father had told me: "The Germans treated us like workhorses, and like horses we wore blinders." He would cup his hands to the sides of his face. "You didn't look left, you didn't look right. You looked only in front, for your own needs."

Outside the restaurant's picture windows, white cabin cruisers and tall sailboats sway gently on their mooring lines. *How peaceful . . .* I had read about the fragility of memory, how dates and incidents fade with the passage of time. I was ready for that. This is different. What Mark is saying, and what my father tried

to tell me, is that survival required you to lobotomize your psyche and excise the fellow on the next pallet. Sure, prisoners forged friendships and alliances to help and encourage one another. You just did not dare get too close. Survival was more a game of solitaire than of bridge. House rules were brutal. Winners got to play again tomorrow. Losers did not.

I turn back to my two elderly hosts. Sigmund and Mark couldn't know my father because they didn't need to know him. Each was playing his own hand of survival solitaire. This revelation is sobering. Assuming I even find other survivors who remember Dad, their recollections will be facile at best. Not because they forgot, but because they wanted not to know.

We drive to Sigmund's tenth-floor condo with panoramic views of the Gulf of Mexico. His wife of fifty-eight years, Jennie, brings out platters of biscuits and fruit, coffee and tea. Trying to explain that we had just eaten is pointless.

Sigmund disappears into his study and returns with a copy of Walter Spitzer's new autobiography, in French. Having only recently received it, he proudly shows me extensively underlined and annotated passages with names of fellow Blechhammer prisoners, including one in which Dolek Lajtner is saved by the Jewish head of the camp after being caught with a bottle of schnapps by a German guard.

Mark, meanwhile, phones his cousin in Los Angeles. Motek Kleiman is eighty-eight. As he hands me the phone, Mark boasts that Motek's memory is so reliable, archivists have used him to identify faces from family photo albums recovered after the war.

"Sure, I knew Dolek for forty years, even after the war," Motek tells me. "The Lajtners were a very prominent family, with many business interests and influence."

This is more like it. I know my grandfather, Abram Lajtner, and two of his brothers were metal craftsmen who became wealthy manufacturers supplying the region's booming coal and steel industries with fabricated metal products like chimney

covers and vents. Grandpa also owned a roofing-paper factory. Motek tells me something I hadn't heard: Abram Lajtner was also a silent partner in a coal mine—silent because Jews were forbidden from owning Polish mines outright.

Motek had gone to high school with my father's youngest sister, Pola.

"She was a beautiful girl, a beautiful personality," he says. "She had long black hair and was very popular. I'd see Dolek from time to time when he came to pick her up at school."

"Were you friends?" I ask. "Did you hang out with her?"

Motek half laughs. "In the old country there was a lot of, uh, snobbism. We were of a different class, so to speak. We had our groups and they had their groups, and I would have been too shy to speak to a girl like that."

Motek's father had been a high-end women's couturier, with exclusive boutiques in two cities. "We were very comfortable and had a good life—two maids—but the Lajtners, you could say, were among the town's royalty."

The last time Motek saw Pola was in December 1939, three months into the war. "She was in our house. My father was making for her a fur coat, but the fur was on the inside so no one would see it. I believe she was planning to go to Russia, but I don't know if she ever made it."

She didn't. It would take me two more years to piece together Pola's story.

Motek and his wife immigrated to the United States in 1954, six years after my parents had arrived in New York.

"I telephoned your father from the airport," Motek says. "When he told me he was working in a clothing factory as a presser, I couldn't believe it. Dolek Lajtner a presser? How could this be?"

.....

During the 1950s, my father was a finishing presser at Ripley Clothing, ironing out the last creases and wrinkles before the suits were bagged and shipped to 150 Ripley stores nationwide.

His day started at 5:30 a.m. The glow of streetlights leaked along the edges of the paper window shade into the small bedroom I shared with my parents. Dad would swat the Little Ben alarm clock into silence and swing his legs out of bed. He'd just sit there, bare feet on the wood floor, head bowed, for a full minute, maybe more. He'd then retrieve two elastic support socks, the flesh-colored kind without heels or toes, and pull them up over his varicose-veined calves.

I watched this daily ritual from my cot a few feet from my parents' bed. Often I'd follow Dad to the bathroom. We'd stand side by side, peeing into the toilet, suppressing giggles lest we wake Mom, who worked nights.

Dad washed birdbath style, splashing soapy water under his armpits and across the back of his thick neck. I watched in awe as he injected a Gillette Blue Blade into the safety razor, brushed foam on his face, and shaved with quick, definite strokes.

I wanted to shave, "just like you, Dad."

"Soon enough, son, soon enough." He laughed and daubed shaving cream on my nose.

For breakfast, Dad soft-boiled two eggs, buttered a slice of rye bread, and stirred milk and sugar into a glass of Nescafe Instant Coffee. He was out the door with the sunrise. I'd climb into my father's side of the bed, fidget some, and fall asleep snuggled up against Mom. She never stirred.

Dad once took me to the factory to show me where he worked, a grimy red brick building overlooking the Hudson River. He was not working that day because an iron had burned his arm. It was wrapped in white gauze stained yellow with salve. He held my hand as we rode up a rattling elevator without a safety gate or door. He led me past hissing machines and racks of suits being wheeled along dingy corridors.

He lifted me onto a long worktable with eight built-in ironing boards. The irons, much larger than Mom's at home, were tethered to the ceiling with springs and chains. Dad's fellow pressers looked a lot like him: warm smiles and bad teeth, rounded shoulders and thinning hair. Sweat glistened on shiny foreheads and stained their sleeveless T-shirts. Everyone spoke Yiddish, even Irish Red and the Puerto Rican brothers at the far end of the table.

It was piecework—you were paid for each suit you pressed. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union enforced a strict quota system. This prevented the bosses from overloading workers. It also meant you couldn't earn more than your union brother no matter how badly you needed the extra cash.

The garment business was seasonal, lengthy furloughs a fact of life. Even during the season, work was not always guaranteed. Dad could leave home at dawn and return by noon; not enough suits had been cut to keep the line busy. I remember my father sitting home for days on end reading his Yiddish newspapers.

This drove Mom crazy. She would yell and taunt him for being lazy, for not seeking a real job, for not pulling his weight to support us. Once she got started, I'd run to the bathroom and cringe until the shouting ceased. Dad might yell back some, but, for the most part, he just took it. We accepted that Mom would blow up suddenly and cool down just as fast.

After I had heard some of Dad's war stories, I once asked why he didn't seek work as a welder, the skill that saved his life in the war. He looked down at the floor. "The smell of acetylene," he said, "it brings back memories of the camps. I can't do it."

He apprenticed for a while with an uncle to learn the picture-framing business. The lessons ended abruptly when the uncle got scared Dad would become a competitor. Or that's how Mom liked to tell it.

A cigarette and newspaper stand at the Excelsior Hotel, across from the Hayden Planetarium, lasted a couple of months, as did another kiosk at a midtown office building.

My parents' most ambitious endeavor was manufacturing vinyl doilies that were as delicate as fine lace. That's how I was introduced to the Main Reading Room of the New York Public Library, with its glorious frescoed ceiling and gold-and-rose painted rosettes. Dad used the library to teach himself the chemistry of vinyl. Insecure with his English, he took me along to translate our needs to the reference librarians. I was about eleven years old at the time.

Mom had acquired several brass plates etched with different doily patterns from distant cousins in the plastics business. Using a painter's spatula, a vinyl paste was spread into the etchings much like grout on bathroom tiles. Dad heated the plates on our kitchen stove until the paste became plastic. Using dental picks, he teased the doilies from the molds and set them aside to cool.

Weeks of trial and error followed—getting the chemicals and consistency of the paste right, applying it just so to the plates, and developing the light touch needed to lift the finished doilies from the forms with dental picks without tearing them. Cooking vinyl was a challenge. Too soon, and he ended up with taffy-like glop. Too hot, and the stench of melting plastic filled our home. Dad rented a basement apartment in a tenement a few doors down and turned it into a workshop with long tables and drying racks. He used his dormant knowledge of iron and welding to design a stove with six-foot-long burners and precise gas valves.

Dad worked late into the night cooking up vinyl doilies. Mom bundled them six to a pack and sold them door-to-door to small stores and gift shops. The real goal was to sell custom-designed doilies for hotels and tourist venues. My first visit to the Statue of Liberty came when Dad took me along to help pitch the idea to the gift shop manager.

After some months, the back of Dad's neck and shoulders started breaking out in suppurating boils. The doctor said it might be an allergy or a reaction to something at work. Dad read up on PCB, a chemical suspected of causing cancer, and realized cooking

vinyl without proper ventilation, protective clothing, or a face mask was a bad idea. Doing so in the basement of a residential apartment building on the Upper West Side of Manhattan also violated any number of zoning and health codes. A proper workspace, with proper equipment and ventilation, cost money. We had none. Dad returned to the tethered irons of the clothing factory.

I still have those brass plates delicately etched in doily patterns.

.....

Around the time of my Florida trip, the news is full of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad denying the Holocaust. “Some European countries insist on saying that Hitler killed millions of innocent Jews in furnaces,” Ahmadinejad said. “We don’t accept this claim.”

I think of Sigmund Walder and Mark Beck, how these old and gray men had reopened their wounded memories for me. I asked Mark why he had never recorded his memories as had other survivors.

“Why should I?” he said. “The world really doesn’t want to know—and I don’t have to justify my survival.”

Decades earlier, my father had told me much the same thing. I was about twelve years old and enthralled with *Mila 18*, Leon Uris’s novel about the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Enraged and in tears, I declared that the uprising would live on in history and people would remember that Jews fought back.

Dad shook his head. “Look son, the world wants to forget and those who hate us will hate us anyway.”

I also think of my children, how unprepared they are to confront the world’s greater and lesser Ahmadinejads. *Papa, you should have recorded your stories for the kids*. I blame myself. Until my hunt for Bill Ball, I did nothing to preserve my father’s legacy except repeat some old stories that I never fully understood or appreciated.

Before Ahmadinejad, I airily dismissed the notion that

anyone could seriously deny the Holocaust. Now, my outrage is magnified by what I have learned these past few weeks—and by my impotence to do anything about it.

Two days after my return from Florida, a thin brown manila envelope arrives from the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

Inside is a copy of this document:

Konzentrationslager AUSCHWITZ. Art der Haft: Sch. Just. Gef. Nr.: 174904

Name und Vorname: LAJTNER JOSEF Israel (4786)
 geb.: 11.8.1911 zu: • Bendsburg O.S.
 Wohnort: Stremieszycze, Lange Str. 40, Kr. Bendsburg O.S.
 Beruf: Elektroschweißer Rel.: mor.
 Staatsangehörigkeit: chem. Polen Stand: led.
 Name der Eltern: Abraham u. Fajyla geb. Wlozostka Rasse: jüd.
 Wohnort: W. gest. N. umb. A.
 Name der Ehefrau: — Rasse: —
 Wohnort: —
 Kinder: keine Alleiniger Ernährer der Familie oder der Eltern: —
 Bildung: 4 Kl. Volkssch.
 Militärdienstzeit: — von — bis —
 Kriegsdienstzeit: — von — bis —
 Größe: 169 Gestalt: schlank Gesicht: längl. Augen: braun
 Nase: gradl. Mund: norm. Ohren: m. gr. Zähne: 3f
 Haare: schwarz Sprache: poln. deutsch
 Ansteckende Krankheit oder Gebrechen: keine
 Besondere Kennzeichen: keine
 Rentenempfänger: nein
 Verhaftet am: 23.6.43 wo: Stremieszycze
 Mal eingeliefert: 1. April 1944 2. Mal eingeliefert: —
 Einweisende Dienststelle: RSHA
 Grund: —
 Parteizugehörigkeit: keine von — bis —
 Welche Funktionen: keine
 Mitglied v. Unterorganisationen: keine
 Kriminelle Vorstrafen: ang. keine
 Politische Vorstrafen: ang. keine

Ich bin darauf hingewiesen worden, dass meine Bestrafung wegen intellektueller Urkundenfälschung erfolgt, wenn sich die obigen Angaben als falsch erweisen sollten.

Lajtner Josef Israel jüd.
 11.8.1911

Der Lagerkommandant

KL/42/4.43 500.000

No doubts. None at all. My father's calligraphic signature hugs the lower left corner. His tattoo number—177904—the upper right. It is my father's *Häftlingspersonalbogen*, the prisoner registration form, filled out when Blechhammer became a subcamp of Auschwitz on April 1, 1944.

Here was Dad's life, reduced to a single page. Born August 11, 1911. Five feet seven inches. Black hair and brown eyes. A long face, a straight nose, a "normal" mouth and "mid-sized" ears and missing two teeth. He had no infectious diseases or illnesses, belonged to no political party, collected no pension. He had presumably not committed any criminal violations or criminal political acts. While the "reason" for his arrest was blank, the top of the form noted "type of arrest: Jew."

In 1938, as part of the notorious Nuremberg racial laws, the Nazis adopted Law #174, which required all Jewish men to add "Israel" and all Jewish women to add "Sarah" to their names so they could be more readily identified as Jews. Sure enough, printed boldly on the form next to my father's name was "Israel."

Dad lied to the Nazis twice. He listed his mother's whereabouts as "unknown" even though she was alive and well in Brooklyn, where she had gone to visit her daughter the year before the war broke out. By April 1944, American bombers were pounding German cities. Announcing that his mother was in the United States would have ensured him a beating, or worse. He also claimed only a fourth-grade education. In fact, he had graduated public high school in Dabrowa. Diminishing his educational background had its advantages. Dad often told how Nazi guards took particular pleasure in humiliating "uppity" educated Jews.

His profession was listed as "electro-welder" and his address as 40 Louge Street in the hamlet of Strzemieszyce, pronounced Shtre-ma-shitz-eh. Consulting a map, I see it would have been about a ten-minute tram or bicycle ride from his hometown of Dabrowa, an industrial city in the Dabrowa Basin, known locally as Zagłębie, close to Germany in southwestern Poland.

How did Dad end up in Strzemieszyce? I remember stories about the family's big house in Dabrowa built by his father. He shared that house with his half brothers and sisters. Why wasn't he living at home?

I study the form as if it were a religious relic, a talisman from antiquity. Dad brought back no photographs or war souvenirs. He received no purple hearts, medals, or citations celebrating his survival. Here is a document—a *Nazi document*—that told more about my father at a specific time and place than he ever had.

Here is independent corroboration from the most unlikely source that he had been seized, enslaved, branded, and sentenced to the most notorious factory of death devised by man. No longer does his story depend on fading memories of a fading generation.

Well, now. This changes everything. If one such relic exists, might not others? What truths might they hold? What secrets might they reveal?

Chapter 3

OF DIAMONDS AND DOCUMENTS

The three documents that forever changed the way I think of my father arrived in a large white envelope with an Auschwitz return address.

After finding my father's Auschwitz registration form, I emailed the three concentration camps where I knew he had been a prisoner—Auschwitz, Gross-Rosen, and Buchenwald—and the International Tracing Service (ITS) at Bad Arolsen, Germany. With thirty million documents, the ITS is the largest archive in the world on the Nazi persecution and its victims.

I asked for anything they might have about Josef Lajtner, born August 11, 1911, with Auschwitz tattoo number 177904.

Gross-Rosen responded almost immediately, saying my father's name was on a list of prisoners sent to Buchenwald in February 1945. Auschwitz replied a few weeks later asking for more details. An ITS form letter advised it would take at least a year before my queries were answered because of the backlog of requests. Buchenwald never acknowledged my emails.

Fall begat winter and by the time winter begat spring, my queries had become a distant memory. Now, six months later, here's this thin white envelope from the Auschwitz-Birkenau

State Museum in Poland sitting among the day's bills and brochures on the foyer table.

I hold my breath and pull out a packet of papers held together with a large white clip. On top, an academic article about Blechhammer. I'd already read it. I exhale. Next, a copy of my father's Auschwitz registration. It's the same form that had triggered my queries in the first place. *Six months for this?* I gulp down my rising frustration.

Behind the registration form are copies of three half-sheets of paper in German. I glance through all three, then study each one again, slowly.

"Holy shit."

"What?" my wife says. I slump against the foyer table. "What? What?"

The first is little more than a scrap of paper with an elaborate heading, a single typed sentence, and two lines of scrawled German:

PAŃSTWOWE MUZEUM
 Muzeum Historyczne w Warszawie
 Al. Jerozolimskie 176, Warszawa

Konz.Lager Auschwitz III
 Kommandantur/ Abt.II

Arb.Lager Blechhammer,
 den 19.10.1944.

34

2

(771)

Dienstnotiz für die Abteilung III
in Monowitz.

Die Häftlinge Nr. 177904 - 178089 - 178582
 und 178921 sind an einer Strafsache beteiligt.

*N.B. Der Zivilist hat alle mit meinem Einverständnis
 gebracht und hat die Sache von Blechhammer hierher
 gebracht.*

Schmitt

Unterscharführer

It lists four prisoner numbers, starting with my father's—177904—who “partook in a criminal act.” The hand-written sentence reads, “The civilian acted with my consent and brought the diamond here.” It was signed by an SS sergeant.

This was the only document of three with a date, October 19, 1944, which I assume applies to all of them. I'm wrong. The date and handwritten scrawl will have very different implications.

It is my father's familiar signature on the bottom of the second document that triggers my expletive. It's titled "Interrogation Statement."

773

Konz.Lager Auschwitz III
 Arb.Lager Blechhammer
 Abteilung II

Blechhammer, den
 19.10.1944

Vernehmungsniederschrift.

Vorgeführt erscheint der jüd.Sch.Häftl.Nr.177904, L a j t n e r J o s e f, geb.am 11.8.11 in Bendsburg, beschäftigt beim K-27 (Bau 408), und macht auf Befragen, und zur Wahrheit ermahnt, die nachstehenden Aussagen.

Zur Sache: Den H o l i s c h RD. a.W. (Abt.III DVL.) lernte ich im Jahre 1941 in Dombrowa kennen. Im Herbst 1943 traf ich ihn hier im Werkgelände. Ich begrüßte ihn und fragte nach Brot. Mehrere Male hat er mir Brot gebracht. Im Laufe der Zeit mag das ungefähr 5 bis 6 mal geschehen sein. Bei einem dieser Besuche übergab ich dem Holisch 15 Brillanten, die er für mich verkaufen sollte. Er hat mir auch im Laufe der Zeit 500,00 Rm. dafür gegeben. Die Brillanten hatten jedoch einen Wert von ca. 1500,00 Rm. Weitere Wertgegenstände sowie Geld habe ich nicht in meinem Besitz. Ich habe die Wahrheit gesagt und habe weiter nichts hinzuzufügen.

v. Josef Layhag u.
 geschlossen
 # Unterscharführer

Hauptvernehmungsprotokoll befindet sich bei der Geheimen Staatspolizei in Heydebreck.

Nr. In. 107132
 PARSTWINE BILZ 1944

Syg D. An I, II, III -2/355

This is the translation:

I n t e r r o g a t i o n P r o t o c o l

Here presents the Jewish prisoner Nr. 177904, L a j t n e r Josef, born 8/11/11 in Bendsburg, from work kommando 27 (Building 408), when questioned, and cautioned to be truthful, the following statements.

To the matter: I first became acquainted with H o l i s c h RD. a.W. (Division III DVL) in the year 1941 in Dabrowa. Fall of 1943 I met him here in the work area.

I greeted him and asked for bread. He brought me bread several times. Over the course of time this may have occurred 5 or 6 times. At one of these visits I handed Holisch 15 diamonds that he was supposed to sell for me. He gave me 500 Rm for them over the course of time. Yet the diamonds had a value of about 1500 Rm. I do not have further items of value such as money in my possession. I have said the truth and have nothing more to add.

V. G. U. [Read, Approved, and Signed]
Josef Lajtner

Main interrogation file is found at
Gestapo in Heydebreck

A signed confession? Fifteen diamonds? Dad never spoke of this, nor of any Pole named Holisch who had given him food.

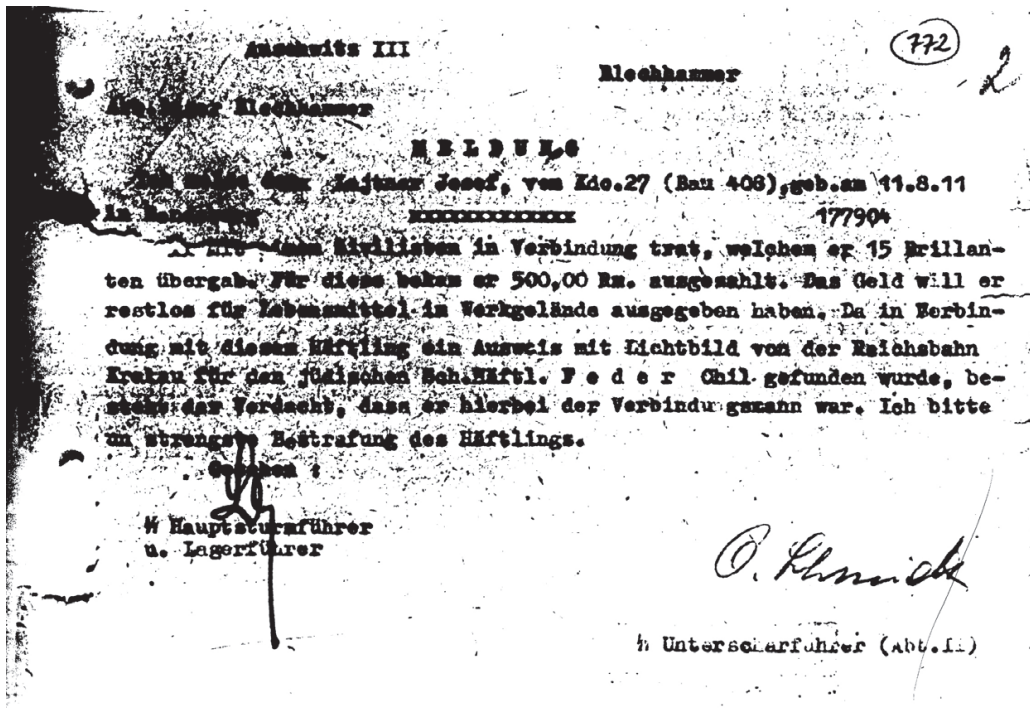
I dug out the email my cousin in Florida had sent months earlier, about the old Belgian Jew dying of typhoid fever. Dad had given him bread and water. Before the old man died, he told Dad where he had buried a bag of diamonds.

Dad had mentioned diamonds only in passing. Like when he pulled his back carrying sacks of potatoes. "The pain was so bad, I could hardly breathe," he said. He went to the *Revier*, the infirmary, and bribed the orderly with "a very small diamond." That bought him daily liniment massages for a week until he could stand straight. The point of that story was not the bribe but the risk: The Gestapo would show up at the *Revier* unannounced and ship everyone to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. He then repeated the moral of so many of his stories: *So you see son, in the end it didn't matter if you had money or not, were smart or dumb. Life was worth nothing—absolutely nothing. You needed luck.*

So there was that.

But fifteen diamonds? Dad was more deeply involved in the black-market smuggling than he had ever let on. Smuggling diamonds under the nose of the SS? How could this be the same quiet, unassuming man who wouldn't play cards because he didn't like to gamble?

The third document—simply titled “M E L D U N G,” or “R E P O R T”—leaves me stunned and shaken.



This is the translation:

R E P O R T

I am reporting Lajtner Josef, from
order 27(Building 408), born 8/11/11 in
Bendsburg. xxxxxxxxxxxxxx 177904
He associated with a civilian, whom he
gave 15 diamonds. For these he received
500 Reichsmark. He was to have spent the
entire sum of money on nourishment in

the work area. In connection with this prisoner, a picture identification card of the Reich/National Railroad Krakau for the Jewish prisoner F e d e r Chil was found. Thus, the suspicion was aroused that he, therein, was the contact person. I ask for the strictest punishment of the prisoner.

.....

I once asked my father why he didn't simply run away and escape like in the movies. I was a kid and wanted—no, needed—him to be a hero, to know that he had not accepted his fate like some sheep.

Dad took a deep breath and sighed, like how was he going to explain this to a ten-year-old? It wasn't that easy, he said. Blechhammer was in Germany, not Poland. He wore blue-and-gray striped pajamas, his head was shaved, and his left arm was tattooed with numbers. Assuming he had managed to get across the nearby border to Poland, chances were Polish peasants would turn him in for the reward.

“But I'll tell you something—I did try to escape,” he said.

“Really?”

“You remember Charlie Feder?”

Sure. Charlie was an old family friend with frizzy hair and piercing blue eyes who installed telephones in the 1950s, back when AT&T was still known as Ma Bell.

At the refinery construction site, Charlie had met a Polish Christian friend from before the war who had contacts with the Polish underground. For his part, Dad was on good terms with some English POWs. He had traded with the English many times. He would get a bottle of vodka from Polish workers and swap it for English Player's cigarettes or tins of sardines or maybe a bar of chocolate from their Red Cross packages.

“Did you eat the chocolate?” I once asked.

“Nah. It was too valuable. For a bar of chocolate, the soup *Kapo* [the prisoner trustee] would double my portion for a week,

and serve it from the bottom where there might be a piece of turnip or horse meat.”

This time Dad wanted something very different from his British friends. The POWs had a camera and agreed to take head shots of Dad and Charlie.

Charlie gave the photos to his Polish friend who smuggled them to the underground. At a secret forgery shop, the photos were to be made into ID cards for the national railway. The phony cards would then be smuggled back to the refinery via Charlie's friend. Charlie and my father would use them to escape, dressed in civilian clothes bought from Polish workers at the worksite.

The plan was foiled by the Nazi Secret Police.

“The Gestapo raided the forgery shop,” my father said. “They found the card with Charlie Feder's photo. But they never found my picture or any card.”

He thought about this for a long moment. “Why my picture wasn't found? I don't know. Charlie always swore he gave them my picture too.” Even today, I'm not sure my father completely believed his old friend Charlie Feder.

The Gestapo traced the forged card back to Blechhammer and arrested Charlie. Under torture, Charlie implicated my father.

“But I act stupid—completely ignorant—and they have no proof. They sent Charlie off to be gassed in Auschwitz. How he escaped death is another story, his story . . .”

That's where my father's account of attempted escape ended.

To a ten-year-old, it sounded, well, weird. That the Nazis would spare my father's life just because they couldn't prove something? Hard to grasp as a child, hard to explain as an adult. I had all but forgotten that story. I had never told it to my daughters or nieces.

Amazing stories abound in survivor testimonials. If I had doubts believing Dad's story, how would my children, who had never met their grandfather, accept it? How would future generations regard survivor stories like these?

With this Nazi document as confirmation, no longer would Dad's story of attempted escape be an improbable family tale. It was now bona fide history.

Rereading the documents now, it's obvious why the Germans would connect the forged railway cards with the diamonds. Why else would English POWs risk their secret camera for two Jewish prisoners? Why else would the Polish underground even consider helping? You needed more than luck to get POWs and Poles to take such risks.

The Germans had come to the same conclusion.

Over the following weeks, I research and read and speak to historians and survivors. None offer any credible explanation of why my father was allowed to live.

Mark Beck, the survivor from Longboat Key, offers the simplest answer: The SS had been bribed to keep my father alive.

"They were all corrupt," he says. "They didn't want to kill the golden goose. Either that, or someone bribed them. Maybe the *Judenälteste*. Someone was protecting your dad."