

My Blood Strangers: The Rise and Loss of a Viennese Family

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Foreword

Writing this story, putting pen to paper so to speak, was never a conscious decision. I merely started to write, as I usually do. The passion to complete it emanates from some part of me to which I have no access. And I won't pay anyone to help me find that portal. I was deeply into this past (not my past) before I ever questioned why. And I still have no answer.

Perhaps it was all for you, the visitor to the Palais des Beaux Arts, and what you might decide you need. Perhaps you will keep me immortal for an hour or two, at least. Or maybe, I need an association with beautiful things, with new things, with interesting things, with things out of time, things out of place and things we cannot see clearly yet. As, I am sure, do you.

As an institution, idea, and building, the Palais des Beaux Arts endures and it should not remain silent; indeed, telling its story may help to ensure its future. Seth Weiner, the Artistic Director of the PdBA, asked me to write about my relationship to this building. He surely may regret this request now. Between us, we could not agree on the tie between the Palais and me now. Seth suggested "sisters," but I remain uncertain.

Arnold Bachwitz was the father of the Palais des Beaux Arts and also my great-grandfather. But for the particularities of the Austrian legal system before, during, and after World War II, I might have been owner or part owner; the building would have been a great place to hang the paintings I collect and for our cats to play in.

I am certain that thousands of Jewish individuals and families, speaking different languages, who survived the Holocaust, wrote and left written and/or interview narratives similar to mine. Thousands more narratives exist of the non-Jewish victims of other genocides in the Soviet Union, China, and elsewhere before, during, and after World War II. The world scarcely needed one more such narrative.

Remembering someone else's past, not our own, what does that memory mean? When I look at all those people long gone, I am not sure what lessons are embedded here, if any. I seem to be blowing gently on the black embers of the past, expecting perhaps just a brief orange glow somewhere in that pile, not a roaring fire but a tiny bit of warmth or light, a surprise, then colder embers again. Something with meaning.

Introduction

How I Came to Write this Story

This is a complicated story, as most of real history and biography is. Many such stories start, as with mine, backwards, from the present to some arbitrary point in the past.

You don't know me, there is no reason that you should. I am not a celebrity, a novelist, or historian. But, if you are standing in this complex of buildings and in the lovely Palais des Beaux Arts Wien itself, I have a story to tell you. The building is a part of me or, perhaps better said, I am a part of it even though we met only recently, lovers meeting only at the very end of the movie just before the credits roll.

This is an essay in the form of the story of the family that built this confection of a building, hovered over its wonderful creations for half a century, and then died. In its death, it was both a microcosm of its apocalyptic time and insanely typical of millions of other deaths. The story is my version of only a part of my family – my great-grandfather Arnold Bachwitz, my grandmother Grete Bachwitz Lebach, her son Theo Gottlieb, her second husband Willi Lebach, their friend Albert Einstein, and Theo's wife Lisa. Other characters, important in their own right, appear only as walk-on players in this version – siblings, spouses, descendants, victims, and Nazi perpetrators – but the six persons above play the leading roles. If you keep these persons in focus, the story will unfold clearly (I hope).

The evidence on which this is based is all that I could piece together from retold fragments, fugitive documents, historical documents, and books that have come to me over time from a variety of surprising sources about my family, their company, the Palais des Beaux Arts building on Löwengasse 47A, and Vienna from 1900-1942.

Let us start from my beginnings rather than the story's beginning. As an American, I knew nothing of my ancestors in 20th century Germany and Austria for reasons that will become clear in the telling. Being reasonably well-read though, I had a passing familiarity with modern European history from 1860 onward. Born in 1942 and growing to adulthood in California, I thought little that what was "over there" and "back then" had any bearing on me. As a secular Jewish man, I belonged to no particular "American Jewish community" except those others like me, the children of urban, upper-middle class, German- or French-speaking refugees to the New World, individuals who followed their often-secular parents into the arts, academics, or business worlds without reliance on the Old World.

My father Theo, of Germany and Austria, passed away in 2001, in his mid-90s in New York City. In 2003, after both my mother and father had passed away, I was contacted by phone, unexpectedly, by a very dedicated Orthodox Jewish gentleman in New York who acted as an intermediary for American descendants of Holocaust victims in placing claims against the Austrian General Settlement Fund. This intermediary agent had read my father's obituary and extensive profile in New York city newspapers and thought that I might have inherited my father's claim for significant reparations from Austria.

He worked with me and Berlin-based attorneys and others diligently, intelligently, and exhaustively to develop the evidentiary basis underlying my claim for my father's stolen property in Austria, a significant share of a large, prosperous international publishing company and

fashion house Bachwitz AG. My claim was based on the financial and physical properties that had been confiscated from my family in 1938-1939 as part of Austrian Aryanization policies and laws. The claim itself, prepared by my lawyers, was supported by documents that detailed these takings; all this evidence was created by the Nazi administration itself and faithfully conveyed the individual disasters that befell each family member who could or would not escape their fates at the hands of this same regime. It opened a door into a universe that I had not known.

I was gratified to know this information and see copies of the original Nazi documents that chillingly recorded all of this. Gratified is an odd expression. I read the resulting claim with mounting horror and sadness. Because I am a scientist, I am always moved and gratified by the discovery of true things, however that discovery occurs, whoever peels back the blinders to those things, and what they mean. But I had no reason to pursue this history beyond this record.

I signed the claim, mailed it, laughed ruefully at the tiny reparation I received, and put the entire business behind me. I did not comprehend, at that time, what the family had left that was still in existence, the original Palais des Beaux Arts building itself, decades of extraordinary fashion magazines and journals produced by Bachwitz AG, and a story that seemed worth reconstructing from its several pieces.

As part of our inquiries, my agents uncovered, in the *Wiener Stadt- und Landesbibliothek*, a cache of twenty-five 1938-1939 issues of *Chic Parisien*, an international high fashion design magazine published by Bachwitz AG, founded decades earlier by my great-grandfather Arnold Bachwitz and owned at that time by my great-grandmother, grandmother, and grandaunt. These magazines were part of the estate willed to my father Theo and his stepfather Willi.

Subsequently, the library sent this cache to me. For permanent safekeeping of these issues, I in turn sent them as a collection to the Fashion Institute for Design and Marketing, a not-for-profit educational center and library in Los Angeles.

When I received the small settlement amount in 2005, it was not accompanied with an explanation from the General Settlement Fund (GSF) officials as to why it amounted to a few thousand US dollars. I knew that there were about 19,000 GSF claimants overall so I surmised that each restitution was apportioned based on its relative scale of loss. Clearly, the Habsburg family lost more castles and meadows than my family had lost to Nazification.

Later, when re-reading the Nazi documents of 1939 and onward, it dawned on me that I had an Austrian governmental rationale for why my shares were valued at a penny on the dollar. The Nazi government and its semi-private commissioners confiscated a highly-valued commodity, Bachwitz AG, ran it rapidly into the ground financially, and transferred its almost worthless shares and its ultimate ownership to the government after the war destroyed its international market. That was probably Austria's basis for calculating what my family had lost, at that historically-low and legally-defensible point of transfer. It owed me only a small proportional amount of a totally devalued commodity.

Until I was in my own 6th decade, I had no special interest in my family history, as I possessed little of it, mostly bits and pieces, and no prospect of finding more through mining in German and Austrian records. Because my family was Jewish (although also good Germans and Austrians) and I had only passing familiarity with the German language, I thought I lacked an access port to enter that past world of people I never knew, my blood relatives but strangers to me. My parents spoke of it very little and reluctantly, a natural response to their own dreadful

experiences, memories, and losses; I had no surviving relatives with a different attitude toward memory, so this past appeared closed.

It never dawned on me that but for this family history, I would have never come into existence. And that by a thread, as the only son of an only son of an only son of an only son. Because I am no longer a child, I do not need this story for my own identity. I have become, over the decades, my own person without contact with or reference to my unknown Viennese ancestors, other than my own parents.

I recall as a child asking my mother Lisa often about her life in Vienna and my Austrian heritage. She spoke wistfully but little about her Jewish Austrian princess childhood, her teenage brother posing as the urbane daring Viennese princeling (by, for example, smoking cigarettes on the sidewalk, but holding an ashtray in his free hand), nothing about her mother except as a loving person, nothing about her father or stepfather or home life, only a touch here and there – dancing in the Corps de Ballet of the Vienna State Opera, her work as a nurse to the elderly Jewish men and women forced to be housed in her mother’s apartment by Nazi authorities, and so on. I could not tell if she did not remember or would not remember in order to protect herself or me-as-a-child. It was as if her life began only when she and my father Theo reunited in California just prior to America’s entrance into World War II.

Reintroduced to my father much, much later in his and my life, I found him more forthcoming about his past in Europe before the war, probably because he would not have been moved to “protect me” from those realities. I assume that he was quite used to telling at least some part of his story to his closest friends and to strangers, to reporters, critics, biographers, publicists, even his audiences, as part of his professional persona, a theatrical creation of his dubbed “Brother Theodore.” It was only after his and Lisa’s death, however, with the rivulet of documents and questions that appeared without asking from various researchers that I could begin to explain the hows and whys of my parents’ lives and those of my ancestors.

Theo both lived in and apart from America, probably because New York City is its own country and has its own cultures. Theo found that in New York, he could construct a European life he was familiar with, filled with familiar characters and situations that fed his curiosity and sardonic humor. And, somehow, he could find a way to transmit his bizarre comic performances very effectively to American audiences who, if not always understanding what the performances meant – dark sermons (that could have been illustrated by Otto Dix or Kaethe Kollwitz) and German horror-filled children’s fairy tales twisted into comic endings – could be mesmerized by his performance itself.

Lisa always pined for Austria, for Vienna, for her pre-war way of life. While becoming a successful American, she never really liked America or Americans compared with the Vienna she knew or recalled decades later. Her most important late-in-life travel was returning to Vienna and renewing her childhood friendship with a Catholic girlfriend. Only my stepfather Ernest seemed at home in America. As a theatrical director steeped in the dynamic issues in pre- and post-WWI European plays, he was fully aware of the violent abyss that he had barely escaped. But life in his theater was more prominent than anything else but his sons (my two step-brothers

and me). He despised the very idea of Austria, with the exception of symphonic masterpieces and opera.

Ernest came very late and older to the United States and with no English, but was, oddly, the most American, even with his thick accent. He adored FDR and what he saw as social democracy in this country. He was as passionate about baseball as he was about anti-fascism. He was generous to the poor, egalitarian to a fault, forgiving (except for with actors whom he often considered cattle), as if care and feeling for the dispossessed reminded him of who he had been when his homeland collapsed into Nazi horror. What sustained him, as with Theo, was his passion for the theater, his theater, creating something out of nothing but words, gestures, and sets. And what sustained Lisa and Ernest was that they built things together.

People always say that someone should remember, either for the dead or the actions they took or did not take, or as object lessons about something terrible or wonderful. If one is going to keep the flames alive for the victims, no doubt someone else will keep the flames alive for the perpetrators.

Which Finally Brings Us to the Story Itself

A. Let Us Start with the Bachwitz Family

My great-grandfather, Arnold Bachwitz¹, was the founder and president of Bachwitz AG², which produced international fashion magazines and independent women's wear designs domiciled in Vienna. He was married to Rosine Kraus³ and remained owner/publisher of Bachwitz AG and an overall prominent businessman and citizen until his death. I knew nothing of him until I began researching; his personality, his interests, and his dedication to fashion and the arts. All I had were some photographs of him, a serious-looking businessman standing for a portrait, on a vacation in Norway, and a photograph sitting among his peers for a newspaper article.

The man who had commissioned this remarkable building was Arnold Bachwitz. He was intensely interested in fashion and undertook regular trips to Paris in order to visit presentations there. Bachwitz must have had an extremely good sense for future trends; his business in Vienna flourished during the "Grunderzeit," a period of massive growth for the capital of the Danubian monarchy around the turn-of-the-century. This is how the new building in Löwengasse came about; Bachwitz needed space for what he called the Chic Parisien fashion albums and wanted spacious rooms.⁴

¹ Born on June 3, 1854 in Neustadt/Dosse, Brandenburg, died in 1930

² Founded in 1898

³ Born September 2, 1863, died October 30, 1942 in Theresienstadt

⁴ From Eva-Maria Mandl's introduction to "The Palais Around the Corner from Musil and Wittgenstein".

The Bachwitz's topical and seasonal journals included *The Fashion Designer*, *Chic Parisien*⁵, *The Large Mode*⁶, *The Elegant Woman*⁷, *The Coming Season*⁸, and *Les Tailleurs Charmants*⁹, with agents listed in Paris, Vienna, London, Berlin, Brussels, Milan, Lisbon, New York, Prague, Bucharest, Madrid, Auckland, and Warsaw. The *Moderne Welt*¹⁰ magazine, in addition to merely illustrating European fashion, focused on current cultural and lifestyle matters much as *The New Yorker*, *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Cosmopolitan* did then and do today. Early issues of this women's magazine seemed to depict the elegant life of the salon, the drawing room, and the peignoir. Over time, the depiction of the modern woman became far more sporting, adventurous, and glamorous in her tastes, fashions, interests, and lifestyle. A thorough review and analysis of the visual content of this magazine's issues over time would constitute one striking visual cultural history of upper middle-class women in this brief hiatus from general war in Europe. What struck me in a brief scan of the covers in the 1920s and early 1930s was the treatment of men as only background accessories to women, scaled like the motorcycles, automobiles, airplanes, boats, swimming pools, diving pools, ski slopes, hunting scenes, and beach resorts in the backgrounds of their environments.

For my purposes of reconstructing my long-dead relatives, one could take the reverse prismatic view, reading the 18 years of publication as a reflection of the otherwise now-inaccessible minds, character, values, and hopes of the long-ago Atelier Bachwitz. What were they thinking, understanding, intending, selecting, commissioning, valuing, and hoping?

These Bachwitz AG and Atelier Bachwitz journals, catalogues, and special issues were available in numerous languages, some were trilingual. Their production relied on approximately 1000 skilled personnel who designed the fashions and hand-painted the colors (pochoir) on the models (before, fashion magazines were printed on slick paper and relied on chromatography and photography). In all, the magazine was routinely available in 55 countries around the world.

The main branch of the publishing house was in Vienna, the luxurious Art Nouveau building at Löwengasse 47a, 1030 Vienna, which Arnold Bachwitz had designed by Anton and Josef Drexler. When completed, the building received accolades as an adornment to the city. It was described as a corner building richly decorated with a globe supported by three female figures flanking the corner tower. In the staircase it has a relief with even more female characters and also its original elevator, filigree glass windows, and the words Palais des Beaux Arts cast in plaster on the facade above the main entrance.

My grandmother Grete (Margarethe Kraus Bachwitz) was born in 1885 in Vienna, as one of Arnold and Rosine Bachwitz's two daughters.¹¹ Grete married Emil Gottlieb¹² on September 5,

⁵ Published 1898-1939

⁶ Published 1900-1922

⁷ Published 1900-1929

⁸ Published 1920-1938

⁹ Published 1939

¹⁰ Published 1918-1939

¹¹ At her marriage, she resided at Wipplingerstrasse 2, 1010 Vienna and was later recorded as residing at Taborstrasse 21, 1020 Vienna.

1905. A photograph of a beach party with him in swim shorts is the only record of him that has survived. He was to be my grandfather.

Grete and Emil had a son, Theodor Amadeus Gottlieb, my father Theo.¹³ My grandparents' marriage ended in divorce. Stories have it that Emil was a talented nonprofessional pianist, but also a playboy during his marriage, which may account for its end. Emil died in Theresienstadt concentration camp of "enteritis".¹⁴

Subsequent to the divorce,¹⁵ Grete married Willi Lebach, part-owner and director of a large prosperous women's wear materials company. A photograph of them much later is available, but nothing is known of their attachments, interests, or their life together. No letters between them are believed to have survived. Grete instructed Theo, before her death, to retrieve and destroy her personal correspondence, which he did. Little is known directly of Grete other than that she had a natural aptitude for the piano. Willi had a reputation as a good business man with an interest in the industrial applications of materials science. He never adopted Theo for some reason, probably related to business and family inheritances, so he remained Theo's stepfather. They were never close.

Theo's early years are documented, ultimately he grew up to be a very complex person and personality, but who he actually was well into his 30s remains unknown.

B. Theo's Early Life in his Own Words

At some point in 1914 following the marriage between Grete and Willi, Grete and her 8 year-old son Theo moved into Willi's home in Dusseldorf.¹⁶ There are some fuzzy areas and missing pieces in this rendition of Theo's own biography. Some exact dates may represent his best memory, given that he had no surviving papers from his pre-war years. His own detached and ironic rendition is, in my experience of my father, just like him. He seems to have been a jack-of-some-trades for a few years, perhaps an obligatory stint for his grandfather's company or merely making a living but pursuing a theatrical career on his own. Theo left a sort of written curriculum vitae when, at some downturn in his theatrical career ("a quicksand business going from bad to worse") in the US, possibly in the 1970s or 1980s, he applied to become a teacher of German:

¹² Born July 24, 1881 in Vienna. Him and Grete were married on September 5, 1905. They resided at Untere Weißgerberstraße 9, 1030 Vienna

¹³ Born November 11, 1906

¹⁴ On October 10, 1942

¹⁵ Grete and Willi divorced on March 15, 1914.

¹⁶ It is difficult to determine where they actually lived at different points in time because the records fail to differentiate between the residences and business addresses where people were legally registered. For example, in Berlin, Willi was registered under the Gebrüder Lebach company with his brother Carl from 1910 to 1920, but may have actually resided in Dusseldorf.

1913

My mother divorced my father Emil Gottlieb, Vienna Austria and remarried Mr. Willibald Lebach who became my stepfather. I was brought up in his house and was known to most people under the name Theo Lebach-Gottlieb, although my legal name remained Theodor Gottlieb. I entered the Prinz Georg Gymnasium in Düsseldorf and stayed in that school for the next 12 years.

1925

I received my Arbitrenten-Diploma, which was signed by the Director of that school, Professor Martin.

1926

I attended for one year the Preussische Fachschule Für Textil-Industrie (Bandwebemaschinen) in Barmen (now Wuppertal). [for the textile industry, offering manufacturing courses in ribbon and fabric weaving, braiding, and trim assembly]

1927 to 1929

I worked as an apprentice in the firm of Frank & Lehmann, Köln, Untersachsenhausen

1929

I studied, for one-half of one year, German literature, German Theatre at the Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus under the Intendatur of Dumont-Lindeman and passed my Deutsche Staatliche Prüfung as an actor. (The certificate now being in the file of Dr. Ettinger)

1929 to 1933

I worked in the offices of “Chic Parisien, Bachwitz A.G., Modejournalverlag Generalvertretung für Deutschland in Berlin.” I’ve lost contact with everyone there since the end of 1933.¹⁷

1933 to 1938¹⁸

I moved to Vienna where I worked for the motherhouse (of Chic Parisien).

Having always been attracted to the study of languages, to literature, drama and especially the spoken word, I enrolled for two years at the Deutsche Hochschule Für Dramatische Künste, a subdivision of the Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus. I then continued my studies at the University of Köln where I studied “Germanistic” with the intent of getting a doctorate in Philology (...)a way of life I distinctly preferred to the alternative of entering my stepfather’s textile firms.

¹⁷ While the dates from Theo’s letters are at variance with those in his CV, the substance of his memory and the letters coincide. He lists his addresses as Schaperstrasse 29, Berlin and, on Willi’s stationery, Knesebeckstr. 68, Berlin-Charlottenburg.

¹⁸ Theo spoke frequently about having immigrating to Switzerland in 1933, only to be deported back to Berlin, Germany for working illegally (playing chess for money) in Switzerland in contravention of his visa status. Theo’s story left the impression that his emigration to Switzerland was a flight from ascendant Nazism in Germany. Yet, strictly speaking, he was only briefly in Switzerland, some four months, arriving in Zurich from Berlin on June 12, 1933 and returning to Berlin October 10, 1933. No other Swiss sojourn has been recorded. There is no concrete evidence of what he did between 1933 and 1938, but his own CV states that he returned to Bachwitz AG in Vienna.

But the advent of Hitler interrupted my studies just before their completion. Being of Jewish ancestry I left Germany and, after living for a while in Zürich, Switzerland, I returned to my native, yet almost forgotten Austria, where I wrote essays and articles for some of my Grandfather's (Arnold Bachwitz) publications.

I also took on students for instruction in drama and elocution and helped youngsters to overcome nervous speech defects.

In 1938 Hitler decided to follow me into Austria.

C. A Detour Back to 1926 with Albert Einstein and Grete

The purpose of discussing Albert Einstein (yes, that Albert Einstein) at some length in this memo is not due to my admiration for the world's most recognized man, nor his great achievements themselves, nor for my grandmother Grete's illicit relationship with him, nor an interest in attaching myself to this celebrity, but for his role in my very existence. No, really. My existence is independent of his scientific and speculative theories, either proved or replaced, but dependent upon his contribution to ensuring Theo's future. Let me tell you the documented family story, revelatory of what interesting lives these supposedly staid bourgeois folks lived, cosmology and astrophysics aside.

During 1926-1933, Grete and Albert, both married, struck up a romance that was not a well-kept secret.¹⁹ In later years, Theo reported that Einstein visited with the Lebachs in Dusseldorf for three weeks in 1926 and playing chess with Einstein in this period, a claim that some doubt given Einstein's aversion to the game. So much for first-hand testimony from Theo, an accomplished chess player himself.

While lodging with friends in Düsseldorf, Elsa [Einstein's wife] apparently reacted with jealousy to the way Einstein described his hostess. Einstein replied insensitively: "What funny business are you writing there about Mrs. Lebach? You think that I would be capable of being disloyal in such a way to a splendid man whose hospitality I was enjoying and with whom I was socializing as a friend?"²⁰

This seemed to be a three-party (Albert, Grete, Willi) friendship but a two-party affair. There is no way of knowing whether Willi knew or cared about the affair between Albert and Grete. I know of no correspondence between my grandparents or from Willi to Albert about this topic, even though there is some significant correspondence between and among them over the years and clues about friendship and affair.

Grete was described by most Einstein biographers as the "beautiful blonde Viennese" and the relationship caused considerable grief in the Einstein family. Apropos of nothing, I fail to

¹⁹ Highfield and Carter, 1993

²⁰ Buchwald, p.152

understand why most Einstein biographers refer to Grete as a “blonde beauty”; it makes her sound more like a Hollywood siren, bombshell, or bubblehead when she was none of those. Would the tale have been less lurid had she been only brunette?

Frequently, Grete and Albert went sailing alone at his summer home near Caputh, on the *Tummler* (“Porpoise”), his lovely little sailboat; there are numerous published photos of Albert and Grete on the boat, a 50th birthday gift from some wealthy friends. Einstein’s wife Elsa went shopping in the city whenever a visit by the “Österreicherin” threatened, which was often weekly according to the gossips, household servants mainly, whose writings and interview testimony are the only record of this complicated household life.

Then there was a blonde Austrian, Margarethe Lebach, who became a weekly visitor to Einstein summerhouse in 1931. She too brought edible offerings for Elsa – vanilla pastries that she baked herself. Einstein celebrated their delicate flavor in verse, writing that they made “the Little Angels Sing.” Frau Lebach enjoyed great liberty in his company when she came, Frau Professor would always go into Berlin to do some errands or other business. She always went off into the city early in the morning and only came back late in the evening. She left the field clear, so to speak. The Austrian woman was younger than Frau Professor, and was very attractive, lively, and like to laugh a lot just like the Professor.

The couple’s relationship was an open secret among local people, who would see them sailing together. But vanilla pastries can buy only limited wifely sufferance. Others overheard a passionate argument about the Austrian interloper between Elsa and her daughters. Einstein was angry, and the maid listened through the wooden walls of the summerhouse as the girls told their mother she must either put up with the relationship or seek a separation. They spoke of Einstein merely by his first name, rather than their usual and more affectionate “father Albert”. Elsa was in tears, but she made her decision. The trips into Berlin continued.

It was this kind of humiliation that drove Elsa into fits of jealous rage. Once, after a sailing trip at Caputh, Einstein forgot to bring back from the boat some clothes that needed washing. His conscientious assistant Walther Mayer volunteered to fetch them, and brought back a bundle that Elsa took away to sort out. Shortly afterwards, Einstein was summoned inside and the guests overheard a sharp exchange of words. It emerged that Mayer’s bundle included an elegant and very low-cut bathing dress, which he had wrongly assumed to be Margot’s (Albert’s daughter). Conrad Wachsmann, who recounted the story, added that the outfit belonged to “a good acquaintance” of Einstein, and that Elsa became “monstrously worked up.”

In 1933, the Einsteins departed from Germany setting up a temporary home on the Belgian coast. Micha Bettsek, [Einstein’s godson] vividly remembers the presence of a beautiful Viennese in her early 40s. This was Margarethe Lebach, the same woman who had caused Elsa so much heartache in Berlin. “She was a very nice-looking lady who was a very close friend of Einstein’s and who many years later my mother and father more or less implied that it was rather more than that,” says Bettsek.²¹

²¹ Denis Brian, pp.180-1

Einstein's executor destroyed many personal letters, so that some of the record is blank. Theo reported that before her death, Grete ordered him to burn Albert's letters to her and enclosed locks of hair, which he did.

D. A Fun Detour But to What End?

The key to this story, for me, if no one else, is not that the famous man and my grandmother had a long affair or friendship, cool as that is, and on a lovely sailboat, cool as that is. It is that Einstein, later, was the intended exit instrument for Grete in 1937 and an actual instrument for Willi and Theo to arrive safely in the United States shortly before the war broke out in Europe.

History shows that Einstein in America worked hard to save many Jews and was lucky enough to have an income and other resources that enabled him to support larger efforts and lend a helping hand to individuals.²² To be effective, he had to vouch for their character and their ability to be financially secure in the States. He (and they) also had to demonstrate that they had established their relationship prior to Einstein's departure to America. Frequently, this was evidenced by letters and photos of Einstein with the person in social settings, in professional meetings, and on his sailboat.

Clearly, Grete, Willi and Theo, fit into these formulae. All could be sponsored by Einstein during this period of his great influence based on his well-known relationship with Grete, pictures of them together on the boat, and motivated by his regard for Grete, her husband, and their son. All three listed Einstein's address in Princeton, New Jersey as their immediate destination on the ships' manifests on their voyages to the United States between 1937-1939.

In 1936, Grete was diagnosed with breast cancer in Vienna.²³ In the last year of her life, she visited Einstein in the United States, aboard the *SS Champlain* which arrived in New York from Le Havre on June 11, 1937. The ship's manifest lists her destination as "Friend, Prof. A. Einstein (112 Mercer Street, Princeton, NJ)" and that she will return to Austria, giving her husband Willi's address²⁴. It was probably her first and only trip to the United States, and she had her photos taken on holiday with Einstein in Huntington, Long Island NY on his borrowed sailboat that same year. It was their last sojourn together before she returned to Vienna and sadly died of cancer in 1938²⁵. There is no way for us to know whether this was clearly an inescapable farewell visit between lovers and friends or a chance to arrange her emigration from Austria, or both.

After starting the American process for immigration, she returned to Austria. Grete was, as a Jew, denied needed surgery by Nazi authorities in Vienna. She wrote her will, designating that

²² Isaacson, pp.429-31

²³ She was then living at Gustav-Tschermak-Gasse 1, 1180 Vienna

²⁴ Wohllebengasse 15, 1040 Vienna

²⁵ She dies August 17, 1938 at the Hospital of the Jewish Community, Währinger Gürtel 97, 1180 Vienna. Her body was cremated at Vienna's Central Cemetery.

Willi and Theo would each receive half of her estate, which was 1/3 of outstanding Bachwitz AG shares, split with her mother Rosine and her sister Alice.

Given the fact that major biographers of Einstein have long repeated the larger Einstein-Lebach story in their books, I can now stop walking around wearing a disguise to hide my shame and embarrassment that my grandmother had both loose moral standards and good taste in men. But, also, my belated thanks at long last to Albert.

E. The End of Bachwitz AG and the Bachwitz Family of Vienna

The history of the Bachwitz family is embedded in the documented history of Germany and Austria. In Germany in 1932, the assaults on and boycotts of Jewish shops and professionals became quite serious and in 1933 became deadly and highly organized, supported by an agitated public. In 1933 Hitler was appointed Chancellor, even though the Nazi party was a minority of the German electorate and representation. The government immediately began the marginalization and disenfranchisement of the Jewish population in law, policy, and practice. The Nürnberger laws of 1935 determined the Jews to be non-Aryans and, in a state-engineered future, without political rights at all. These events eventually washed into Austria, first informally, then officially and immediately with Anschluss.

On March 16, 1938, immediately after Anschluss, an Alfred Leithe-Jasper arrived with associates and a squad of Austrian SS-type men in the company offices of Mrs. Rosine Bachwitz, Arnold's widow and Grete's mother. Leithe-Jasper, a printer, had been the main supplier and a creditor of Bachwitz AG. With threats of immediate incarceration by the SS-type men, he was able to intimidate Mrs. Bachwitz, her daughters Grete and Alice, and her sons-in-law Adolf Strel and Willi Lebach, to immediately give him their Bachwitz AG ownership shares. On March 17, 1938, Leithe-Jasper was appointed by Nazi authority as supervisory commissioner of the company, charged with Aryanizing the company and turning its publishing functions into propaganda.

The sudden, unexpected, and forceful raid on the company resulted in the suicide of Adolf Strel (Alice's new husband and a director of the company) the following night and the imprisonment of Willi. Alice was arrested and deported on June 10, 1942 to Prague and was "lost" in Tallinn, Estonia. All the shares were taken from Jewish hands and transferred to the acting majority commissioner, Leithe-Jasper; the intimidation and extortion was so dramatic and drastic even for Austrians, that he came under investigation for these immediate post-Anschluss activities. It was a ruthless taking, even for Austrian Nazis. On the other hand, the happy taking was communicated in a congratulatory memo from one State Commissioner in Vienna to another regional official in Cologne, under the salutation "Heil Hitler!"

While some Jews tried to remain calm and keep faith in their Austrian heimat, they could not prevent hysterical depression from spreading. Many people saw no future—in or outside of Austria—and turned to suicide. The atmosphere in the spring of 1938 drove an unprecedented number of Viennese Jews at an abnormally fast pace to end their lives by suicide. Over five hundred people killed themselves within the first two months. The New Republic described the

*situation in Vienna as “the most sickening spectacle of Nazi barbarity in one of the most highly civilized cities in the world,” and prodded its readers to consider the Jewish despair in Austria: “Is it any wonder that prominent men and women—including skilled doctors and writers—have killed themselves rather than endure this senseless persecution?” (...) Those who committed suicide were already convinced in spring 1938 that there was no way back and no way out—Jewish Vienna had come to an end.*²⁶

As a result of the Party investigation, as well as his inexperience in directing such an enterprise, Leithe-Jasper withdrew from Bachwitz AG management within several months. Another Nazi, Adolf Luser, finally shared the directorship and management of the company. The main task seemed to be the Aryanizing of the company. Thus, the directors fired all the Jewish technicians and artists who worked in the firm for years and had helped in its development.

According to Ilana Offenberger, there appeared to be no clear rationale for early Nazi action vis-a-vis arresting and removing one Jewish male at a time. Some appeared to be taken at random, off the street or in their homes and businesses, to either engender terror and flight, others were taken to compel them to relinquish their wealth and to punish and humiliate them for being professionals, office workers, shopkeepers, and other “non-laboring” workers.

Following Grete’s death²⁷, Willi (listed as one of the heirs in her will and a director of the company since 1924) applied for his inheritance but it was revoked by the Austrian authorities immediately. Grete’s mother Rosine, then deemed to be Willi’s successor to Grete’s estate, and Theo, were each compelled to refrain from any claim to the Bachwitz estate “absolutely and without reservation.” They signed documents, of which I retain copies, to deny any claim of inheritance to shares in the company for which Theo was remunerated 10 German Reich marks. This was recorded by the District Court on 31 March, 1939. These extorted relinquishments (by Grete, Alice, Rosine, Willi, and Theo) was the basis for my claim, six decades later, to the Austrian General Settlement Fund.²⁸

Nearly 2 months after his mother died, Theo had been taken into custody and remained in Dachau until 25 March, 1939 when he was released with the stipulation to leave the Reich within 30 days.²⁹ In 1942, Rosine was taken to Theresienstadt concentration camp where she

²⁶ Offenberger, p.49-51

²⁷ On September 1, 1938

²⁸ Theo surrendered his claim to his estate for 10 Reichsmark and was subsequently released from Dachau and ordered to leave the Reich within 30 days. The 2003 US equivalent value of his 1938 shares in the company was \$3,400,000. At the time, Bachwitz AG was considered one of the principal sources of foreign currency inflow in GrossDeutschland, since 65% of their production was exported to countries ranging from Argentina to Britain to Sweden to Romania.

²⁹ The Germans deported over 7,000 Jewish men from Vienna to Dachau from the Anschluss through the November pogrom. More than 5,000 were released between December 1938 and March 1939 due to the combined efforts of their loved ones and the IKG, and the ability of both to cooperate with and function under the increasingly oppressive German authorities. Inmates who could prove that they could emigrate immediately could be released from the camp. The Richborough refugee camp in Kent, England stood as an important destination, a short-term transmigrant haven for persons who urgently needed to get out of the Reich—primarily, although not limited to, men trapped in Dachau and Buchenwald. Upon arrival in Vienna, most newly released men were forced to say their

died five months later. The gravesite of some of these family members is located in Vienna's Central Cemetery and is marked with a large headstone.

In 1939, Willi and other Lebach family members had to relinquish all their property and personal wealth. Willi was compelled to remain in the Reich until he surrendered his entire claim to Grete's estate as a "flight tax," required by the Third Reich's Flight Control Unit, as a prerequisite for leaving the country. By this time he had already transferred his ownership of Lebach and Company. Willi then requested immediate confirmation in writing to be registered as having been cleared by the tax office for his payment of the flight tax and other charges to leave the country. He was committed to depart the territory within the month, which he did on October 25, 1938.

In return for surrendering all of his ownership of these companies and his household, and paying the flight tax required by emigrating Jews, Willi was allowed to leave the Third Reich. Among Willi's personal household items meticulously listed in the confiscation were his wedding rings, an electric stirrer, an electric iron, and three sets of pajamas.

F. Theo "Escapes"

Theo was arrested and detained at the Dachau concentration camp for about 4 months – November 14, 1938 until March 21, 1939; the dates vary with different documents, but are consistent with the history and purpose of the November Pogrom.

In Dachau, Theo was seriously abused, his front teeth knocked out, and his nose broken. He had to witness the terrible abuse of others in the camp and suffered throughout his life from the dreams and memories of what he saw and experienced, as well as his own injuries. The purpose of his arrest appears clearly to pressure him to legally and "voluntarily" revoke any claims to his own and his mother's estate, a legal nicety.

Having the signed revocation documents, the Gestapo ordered Theo released under an expulsion order that then required him to leave the country in 30 days or be re-arrested with what turned out to be deadly consequences for many. It is likely that the Gestapo order to release individuals cut through some procedural requirements and delays to facilitate the expulsion. Additionally, since Theo was an international traveler for his work, he may also have carried, unlike many other Austrian Jews, a current passport that simplified his departure.

Finally, it is probable that, for Theo, Einstein used his influence with the State Department's consular and immigration services, the IKG, and his own financial and residential resources to facilitate Theo's entry requirements and getting him to the United States. I conclude that this is what Theo meant when he reported that Einstein was responsible for his "escape." There is no way of knowing exactly how much of Willi and Theo's escapes was due to the "pushing" forces

final goodbyes to family members almost immediately. They had been freed upon condition that they would leave the Reich within a specific period of time, ranging from a fortnight to six weeks.

of the Nazi expulsion policies, the “pulling” forces from the United States, itself becoming increasingly anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant, or financial and transmigration support of the IKG. Theo was silent on these matters except for the unspecified help of Einstein.

Immediately after his release from Dachau, Theo reconnected with Elizabeth Kitty (Lisa) Garfein Schein.³⁰ Lisa was a clever, insightful, and moody member of the Corps de Ballet of the Vienna State Opera, as well as a skier and ice skater. She loved music, art, dance, opera, and theater and was always in the heart of “the scene.” Theo had been a frequent and long-term visitor in Lisa’s parents’ house, as she was a child of 13 when they first met. We do not know exactly when or how the beautiful young Lisa and the much older Theo courted and then decided to marry. He was somehow a friend of the family and became infatuated with her while she was madly in love with this romantic, exotic, urbane older man.

In 1939, Theo Lisa got married.³¹ While the marriage did not seem to be primarily one of convenience rather than affection and concern, its timing appears precipitate. Lisa related being driven somewhat into marriage at her mother’s insistence and instigation, who had denied to herself until too late the seriousness of the Nazi state. While pinning her own future on hope, Lisa’s mother wanted her to marry a grown man who could take care of her as her father had. While the marriage probably came as a major relief to her parents, there was no indication that they had arranged this marriage. Theo was at the lowest point in his life, having lost almost everything and everyone he relied on and had just been released with injuries from a concentration camp with the proviso that he exit the country immediately. The parental discussions must have been extraordinarily anxious for Lisa’s welfare.

Theo emigrated alone via Belgium and England where he was maintained in the Richborough Transit Camp, waiting for his papers and travel to the US to be authorized.³² Letters from Lisa’s aunt in England report Theo’s stay there first in the camp, then a few weeks with her, followed by a stay in a local guest house in England until finally his American visa was issued.³³ Importantly, the aunt’s letters record that it was only Theo’s arrival in England that provided the diaspora family with complete news of the remaining family and deteriorating conditions in Vienna, as mail between the Axis and Allied powers was first censored and later stopped.

³⁰ Born in Vienna on May 22, 1921, Lisa was the 17 year-old daughter of yet another Viennese family – Ida Garfein and Marcel Schein, who died of a heart attack in 1936. Ida was remarried in 1938 to Ludwig Langbank, but in 1940, this couple and many of the Langbank family met their destiny in concentration camps.

³¹ On April 15, 1939

³² There is no support for an Austrian document that Theo and his new wife Lisa left Vienna together; the 2009 Vienna State Magistrate's Archives, relying on contemporaneous documents, show Theo and Lisa emigrating Vienna for London together via Belgium on July 23, 1939. The Archives have no additional information, nothing to indicate Lisa’s totally improbable return to Vienna, a much later documented departure for the United States via Lisbon, or Theo’s reaching London. What, Austrian precision fails just when I have learned to rely on it?

³³ “The Richborough Transit Camp, formerly the Kitchener Army Camp, existed from March to August 1939 and served as a temporary stay for some 1,600 people between the ages of 18 and 45, particularly men who were released from Dachau. The IKG helped to erect this camp together with the Council for German Jewry in December 1938.” (Offenberger, p.166, footnote)

Theo's visa was finally issued by London on April 8, 1940 and he departed Liverpool for New York on the *SS Samaria* on May 22, 1940.³⁴ The manifest for the *SS Samaria* listed Theo heading for Albert Einstein³⁵ and reports his father Emil as his nearest relative, at Marc-Aurel-Strasse 3, 1010 Vienna, where Emil apparently was living before he was sent to Theresienstadt. Theo's stated intention was to stay and become a US citizen; upon arrival, he immediately filled out a petition for naturalization³⁶.

When Theo departed alone in 1939, the situation in Vienna was very bad and getting worse. Lisa continued to reside with her mother.³⁷ The Schein family in Vienna was compelled to take in "patients," elderly and ill Jews who were required to leave their own apartments and care institutions. Lisa worked there as a sort of in-home practical nurse. Her extended family had already begun to scatter.³⁸ Those who fled survived the war; those who remained in Vienna and were the subject of still-extant family correspondence died in concentration camps between 1941-1943. The long listing of these aunts, uncles, and cousins is a horror to read today.

Over his later years and to different friends, Theo presented two different renditions for how he ended up at Stanford, equally winning and mythic. One version has Theo arriving at Stanford University where Einstein had arranged his employment as a janitor or elevator operator, relying on the physicists' international "club," in this case Princeton-Stanford. Theo's non-Einstein rendition was that a Jewish refugee organization in New York City, anxious to send the Jewish refugees out of New York fearing a backlash if too many of them settled there, got him the janitor job at Stanford University in California. He recalled what a terrible janitor he was, never having touched a mop before. And that he played chess with Stanford professors, several at a time. And told their fortunes. So, there you have it.

Subsequently, Theo became a shipyard worker for five years in the naval shipyard in Sausalito. He kept waiting to "become a favored, wealthy man again." Instead, he experienced poverty and constant uncertainty.

G. Einstein Saves Willi

Before leaving Einstein and Theo, and recalling Grete's last visit in 1937 with Einstein in the United States before her death of cancer, there were other effects of the three-cornered relationship among Albert, Grete, and Willi. It is unclear how this seemingly amicable relationship actually worked.

³⁴ He arrived in New York on June 1, 1940.

³⁵ At 112 Mercer St. in Princeton

³⁶ Theo received his mail through Willi Lebach (1472 Broadway, New York), then, in 2/41, through a Miss Lee Morgen (640 Mason Street, Apt. 407, San Francisco).

³⁷ They are reported to reside at Untere Weißgerberstraße, 1030 Vienna, perhaps an apartment required by the Nazi authorities, not necessarily the residence previously occupied by her family.

³⁸ They fled to the United States, England, Palestine, Shanghai, Sweden and elsewhere; Lisa's only sibling Harry departed alone in 1938 as a 14 year-old for Sweden.

Based on correspondence and transport documents in the Albert Einstein archives in Israel, it is clear that Willi immigrated to the US with Einstein's help and sponsorship. Willi's ship, the *SS France*, left for the United States on October 20, 1938³⁹, very shortly after Grete's death, the manifest stating that Willi was bound for Albert Einstein's house.⁴⁰

As with Albert and Grete, there is no way for us to know how Willi and Grete parted their lives at the end nor how either Albert or Willi felt about Grete or each other when they both resided in Germany or the United States and corresponded in ensuing years. Indeed, we know little of the friendship or social bond that preceded their emigration. From the first, however, Albert's tone in his letters appears warm, supportive, and generous. Willi's letters are clear that he relied on Albert's support to depart Germany. Most revealing about their friendship was the telegram from Albert to Willi on November 2, 1938, aboard Willi's ship, with warm greetings and telling Willi that Albert's friend will meet him at the pier and take him home to Princeton.

When Willi immigrated, he was already 65 years old and destitute. Willi had a very difficult time establishing himself in America and following through on Einstein's professional and business assistance was not smooth. Both were put in awkward situations because Willi did not stick to his agreements. Albert's tone was exasperated by Willi's seeming inability to follow Albert's advice and Willi's prior agreements.

Willi and Theo, by contrast, had very little contact with each other in these later years; Theo talked about Willi as a distant uncle or as a man who had committed suicide. Theo remembered Willi as a great businessman but knew nothing of any opportunities that Willi may have followed or developed in terms of the American affiliates in the plastics industry or the fashion industry. A long-term friend of Theo's from the 1950s was once asked in the 1980s about Willi. He believed at the time that this might be a different Willi Lebach, not the stepfather, because it was such a distant relationship.

H. Lisa Escapes from Austria

Like her mother, the young Lisa was disinclined to leave Vienna as they believed that the situation would improve. Both mother and daughter were headstrong that way, to their immense peril. There were imposed delays starting before the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939, including financial and bureaucratic constraints. Theo had not yet established residency in the United States. Lisa became seriously ill with some form of jaundice or anemia throughout 1940 and had exit documents problems at the same time.

As the situation looked increasingly dire, Lisa hoped to obtain a visa for Japan in March 1941 in order to immigrate to the United States from Kobe, but then the Japanese stopped that practice. Somehow, she finally received a visa in Vienna on May 14, 1941 and her travel tickets to Lisbon.

³⁹ Arriving in New York on November 2, 1938. The ship's manifest also noted that Willi had lived in the United States from 1892-1897, age 19-24, possibly indicating that he attended university there

⁴⁰ 112 Mercer Street, Princeton..

The story of how she got from Vienna to Lisbon is unknown, arriving sometime in late May, 1941. As Lisa told me, her stay in Lisbon was the first time she functioned as a person independent of her parents. She loved Lisbon with a passion that bespoke more than just a few days of transit in that city waiting for her boat. But it may have been such a breath of free air that it made a greater impression on her. On June 3, 1941, she boarded the *SS Nyassa*⁴¹ for New York, arriving ten days later and staying with her aunt later until she continued her trip to California.

Lisa fortuitously exited Austria and Europe just before the entry of the United States into the war, otherwise her fate may have been sealed. We do not know, and she may not have known at the time, what forces came together to allow her to exit when she did. I doubt that my mother, then a naïve and dependent teenage bride in Austria, knew or wrote to Einstein. It is more likely that she obtained her requisite papers once she met the basic conditions of Theo's having established American sponsorship, finances, and residency and the American quota for that year not yet filled.

In August 1941, Theo was joined by Lisa in San Francisco. Lisa worked briefly as a sales clerk at the *City of Paris* department store. In May 1942, their son Tom was born, the ultimate and well-reasoned purpose of the entire enterprise. Lisa then joined Theo at work in the naval shipyard in Richardson Bay near San Francisco.

I know considerably less about my mother's side of my family, not because they are less interesting or accomplished than the Bachwitz or Lebach families, but because their history has not been formally or thoroughly researched as far as I know. I cannot find researchers whose shoulders I can stand on and am now too lazy and old to start an entirely new quest.

I. Lisa and Theo in America

*I spent seven months, without any great enjoyment, in Dachau, and then managed to immigrate, via England, to the United State where I worked for a few years as a shipyard worker at the Marine Shipyard at Sausalito near San Francisco. Shortly after the end of the war I left San Francisco for Hollywood where, for a while, I was engaged in a variety of film and theatrical enterprises. In 1948 I moved to New York and have been living here ever since, trying – and until recently succeeding– to make a livelihood as a writer and performer and occasional lecturer in colleges all over the country.*⁴²

In 1945, Theo started a one-man show in a little theater in San Francisco, with his horror tales, entitled *Laughter from Hell*, which was artistically acclaimed. Nonetheless, he moved, in mid-1945, to Hollywood without Lisa or me to seek more stable theatrical employment. Lisa moved to Hollywood in early 1946, leaving me briefly with friends and encountering typical post-war housing problems for families.⁴³

⁴¹ She gave her mother Ida Garfein's address in Vienna as Wiesingerstrasse 3, 1010 Vienna.

⁴² From Theo's CV

⁴³ 6703 1/2 Sunset Blvd, then 2510 N. Beachwood Drive

The first intimations of my parents' marriage starting to fray began in 1946. Our little family had moved so that Theo could pursue his acting career in a much larger theater and film environment, filled with similar expatriates. Lisa obtained a job as a cigarette girl at Grauman's Chinese Theater. That coincided with an interest taken by Orson Welles in her; he would call Lisa at home to go out when Rita Hayworth was out of town and Theo was performing. Among my earliest memories of my childhood are Theo in a black hat, cape, and walking stick as he said goodnight to me over my bed and of my mother's warmth and endearing smile the remainder of the time.

At some point in this long-ago time, Theo and Lisa allowed another older refugee, Ernest B. Lonner⁴⁴, who was very poor but also prominent in the German and Austrian theater, to live in their basement room. I don't know if or how the three of them knew each other in Europe or in New York before they all were together in California. One story was that Ernest had been Theo's acting coach but no evidence of where or when. Of course, Lisa and Ernest began a romantic affair. Romantic three-somes were becoming a family tradition. But this time Einstein was not involved, that I know of.

Theo and Ernest actually fought over Lisa in our backyard, a picture I have imagined my entire life, two short, middle-aged, barrel-chested Jewish artists with their long sleeves rolled up, disliking each other's politics as well as their woman's affections, punching each other to little avail, when I was about four or five years old. Theo departed and my parents divorced.

At that point, Theo moved to New York, became a widely acclaimed one-man show in theaters and eventually on television, and worked as a writer, actor, and lecturer in universities around the country. He had guest appearances on national television on the late-night talk shows of Johnny Carson, Merv Griffin, Joey Bishop, Dick Cavett, Steve Allen, and David Letterman among others⁴⁵. Unlike much of the hagiography published about Theo after his death, which mingled his personal and professional personae entirely, his own detached and ironic rendition is, in my experience of my father, just like him. Theo's stage creations were just that; bizarre and sometimes frightening creations of a lively, sophisticated, introspective, and ill-used artist, but not the gentle, edgy, insatiably curious man himself.

Theo disappeared entirely from my life as a custodial condition of the divorce. Forty-five years or so later, I found him at his apartment in New York City. A friend of mine happened to see and tear down a handbill from a utility pole in New York and gave it to me, "Didn't you say that Brother Theodore was your father?" I wrote to his playhouse in Greenwich Village and he replied. I sent him a videotape of a televised presentation of mine; he had his friends over and they all watched it together, surprised that I was so handsome. We began, very carefully, what

⁴⁴ aka Ernst Lönner, altered at Ellis Island due to the lack of umlauts in the language

⁴⁵ A summary of his film work and filmed acts can be found on Youtube and at www.brothertheodore.net (as of February, 2019 the site is not functioning). An independent film biography of his life was produced by Jeff Sumerel, entitled *To My Great Chagrin; The Unbelievable Story of Brother Theodore*. Numerous tape recordings and scripts of his shows remain in private hands.

was to be a close and interesting friendship for the remainder of his life, even though I was not looking for a father and he was not looking for a son.

Theo and his lady celebrated his 90th birthday in New York with my wife and me. He and I spoke frequently on the phone, issues and questions about our past and current lives tumbling out far too fast. I did not join the unusual coterie of friends and admirers of *Brother Theodore*, I was satisfied being a late-life confidante.

Theo died on April 5, 2001 at age 94 of pneumonia at the Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City and was buried at Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Hawthorne New York. An obituary for him appeared in the *New York Times*.⁴⁶ His funeral was at the Plaza Jewish Community Chapel near his apartment, to be attended by only his closest friends⁴⁷. One of these friends wrote “at the very last minute, as we were all standing for the final prayer, his crazy dentist friend rushed in and insisted on playing a tape of ‘Liselotte Bindel’ (*a comic version of a German fairy tale and a staple of Theo’s act*)”. The funeral ended with hearty laughter, to the bewilderment of the people waiting outside for the next service. I’d insisted on a service, figuring he was entitled to whatever perks come with being Jewish. A year later we held an unveiling ceremony, gathering at the grave with the epitaph from one of Theodore’s lines, ‘Where there is death, there is hope.’

Since you have come so far, let me tell you one last story, one read at Theo’s memorial service:

Unlike all of you here, I am not attached to Theo by choice, by friendship, or by admiration for his intellectual or artistic gifts. I am attached to him by an apparently huge amount of genetic material and a distant history. Theo’s line ends with me, since I am the only son of an only son and have no children of my own.

I expect that you who know him well and know something of the story of Theo, my mother Lisa, and my stepfather Ernest, who was also Theo’s drama coach and a stage and film director of some note in Austria and Germany as an assistant to Max Reinhardt and Erwin Piscator.

Although I know all three versions of their story, one each per actor, I am convinced of nothing about it.

Like the wood-cutter in Roshomon, I know there are actually four versions of the story; the wood-cutter’s version and mine are no more accurate than those of the menage a trois distantly observed.

⁴⁶ on 6 April, 2001

⁴⁷ A heavily attended and touching memorial service among his friends and theater colleagues was held in the Ethical Culture Society in New York City in November, 2001, where several of his short films were shown. This was followed by an even more heavily attended (actually a full house) conclave hosted by Dick Cavett at the Museum of Modern Art and incorporated the screening of Sumeral’s new film.

I was around during that strange time among the three of them, but was too small a child to be aware of the dramas around me. I was not even aware that all three had heavy German accents. Suffice it to say that, at about age three or four, Theo had left, my parents had divorced, and my mother was marrying a man who made me eat peas, for which I hated him.

I had no contact with Theo after he had left, as my mother was strongly disinclined to talk about him and when she did, it was spiteful and disdainful. However, I grew up with loving parents and wanted for nothing that a child of Jewish refugees needed to have to become a whole person in the United States.

When my stepfather died in the 1990s, almost 50 years had passed since I had seen my father. While not needing a father at that time, I was curious about what impact his genes had on who I was, both physically and intellectually. So, I found him and he, reluctantly, agreed to meet with me in his apartment for one hour, a visit which stretched into five hours of questions and answers. One thing we did share was curiosity. It was gracious of him, during this visit and subsequent talks, not to present me with his public face which fascinated so many, but merely an older man to a younger man.

Not being a New Yorker, I did not join his coterie of friends and acquaintances but still was supportive of his hopes and ambitions. Nice to have ambitions in one's nineties. As well as an attractive and intelligent "girlfriend"; I read about this "girlfriend" in the Times, so it must be true.

What I want to share with you is this. In my discussions with Theo, he often asked about my mother, a woman who, in his mind, had not aged a day since they separated when she was a startling beauty in her early 20s. He could not imagine her a woman in her 70s and I did not try to create that image for him. I had brought a current family picture of Lisa and her entire family, including my step-brothers and their families; I could not bring myself to show him this picture because the picture in his mind was so perfect, pristine, indelible.

In the mid-1990s, a few years after my stepfather's death, my mother suffered a relapse of a serious cancer. Due to this illness, she aged 30 years in three months and her impending death was certain. I talked to Theo about this on the phone and, generally, encouraged him to talk to her once again.

So, picture this. My mother is lying on the couch, without the strength left to even play with her grandson. I am sitting next to her, reading

a magazine. We are marking time, in the way that everyone understands with the term "inexorable." The phone rang and I answered it. "Tom, this is Theo. How is Lisl?" "Not at all well, do you want to talk to her?" As if, after 45 years of no contact, he would call out of sheer curiosity. "Ja." "Lisa, it's a friend." "Who?" "Just answer it."

I handed her the phone, she still a little cautious about my evasiveness. She listened a moment, her face softened and even beginning to blush, and her voice reverted to a girlish, tender, even romantic sound I had not heard for decades but was truly the sound of my mother's voice as it had been when I was a very small child. "Oh, Teddy."

They began to speak as they had spoken many, many years earlier and I moved away to give her privacy. Perhaps ten minutes later, she put down the phone and smiled. Something had come full circle in her life, thanks to a real person, not an actor, not a bio, but a person.

That is how I will remember him, as a real person, with his eyes wide open, seeing clearly, and understanding what he saw and felt.

References and Notes

I relied on the following few books, all recent publications, for a view into the policies, procedures, and results of the Third Reich's initial program of the exclusion of German-Austrian Jewry through expulsion, expropriation, emigration, and deportation. These books demanded nerves and some emotional stability to read from beginning to end in order to understand my family's experiences in the practical context of the 1938-1942 program. I discovered that these experiences were essentially typical for most Viennese Jews from 1933-1942, even though each individual in Europe had a unique pathway or story.

The bibliography below constitutes a black treasury of facts, analysis, stories, and conclusions. I relied on it because it captures the best research and analysis available to me in English. When I look into their interviews, references, and indexes, I am astounded at how much human effort went into the search and communication for the truth from within earlier works. One result is that each is exceptionally well-written and worthy of careful reading. When even the statisticians with their tables of the destruction of human life are compelled to vent their powerful feelings on these pages, one begins to comprehend the emotions generated by lifetime research into human destruction. I recommend these books as starting points but probably, in the main, ending points for those willing to take a journey into the heart of this darkness.

I ended my families' narratives and my incorporation of these other works as of 1942, when my Viennese relatives passed into the Nazi, Soviet, and other conflagration in the Bloodlands of Europe.

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