GROWING UP

Grandpa always had white hair. Even Mom never knew him otherwise – from her first memories as a child. It was the war, she said.

It took a half hour drive with the *Trabbi*, our tiny East German family car, to get from *Kirchberg* (Chapel Hill) in our village of Bräunsdorf to the town of Grüna in the county of Karl Marx City where Grandpa and Grandma lived in a three-story *AWG* building – a kind of workers housing compound.

Grandpa and Grandma with their first granddaughter – me, in 1975

Through the Rabenstein Forest, a left turn at the Kubitz tavern, and we had arrived at our destination. On the left, Grandpa's garden whizzed by as a flash of color, the yellow city limits sign appearing on the right, and we were there.

Two apartment buildings, grey and inconspicuous – we were destined for the one on the right. We entered through the left entrance and climbed the stairs through the dimly lit stairwell. The shrill sound of the doorbell was followed by the shuffling of Grandpa's slippers and the door opening with Grandpa framed in the doorway, usually in his white, striped undershirt and suspenders; Grandma appearing behind him. Grandpa's stubble prickled our faces as he gave us a welcoming hug. It was a celebration every single time.

A right turn took us into the kitchen where we were greeted by the smell of breadcrumbs and powdered fruit sugar from the purple

box adorned with orange flowers – Grandpa's special mix, which we willingly accepted from him in order to "grow big and strong." The containers were placed on the upper shelf, behind the glass doors of the cupboard. On the worn sideboard, Grandpa taught me how to cut garlic. "It has to be finely cut so the aroma does not dominate," he'd advise.

Next to the cupboard stood the lime-green-colored retro refrigerator with the label from the 1960s, and behind it was the kitchen window overlooking the heavily frequented Karl Marx Street. Grandpa loved leaning out of the window with us to watch the cars. "Don't fall out of the window," Grandma would warn us as Grandpa tightened his grip around our shoulders.

On the other end of the apartment was another reason to lean out of a window. That's where the railroad tracks ran by, and where, once a day toward evening, the train to Stuttgart passed. When Grandma announced "the Stuttgarter," Grandpa would come running with us, hastily setting his porcelain rose aside and flinging open the window. There we'd stand and watch, embraced by Grandpa's strong arms.

We'd follow the train with our eyes for a long time. It was traveling to freedom – far, far away. And we were here, hopelessly here. Our little village was located far from any headline-making political activities. Even here though, there were reasons to look out of the window, watch closely and listen attentively. Our involvement in the local church aroused the greatest suspicion. Page by page was added to the file of the Rüger family; nothing escaped the watchful eyes of the socialist system's keepers.

Surrounded by this omnipresent threat, our young hearts became anxious and guarded. The unpredictable world "out there" started at our hallway door. The dreadful mice at the end of the dark staircase to the basement instilled as much anxiety as the foreign territory we had to cross on our way to the attic where our rooms were located.

Only recently did my mother tell me how hard it was for her to leave me in the care of the "workers and farmers state" of the GDR (German Democratic Republic – former East Germany) on my first day of school. The first few years, I and my siblings were still able to walk home from Ernst Thälmann School, along the village street, around the carp pond, up *Kichberg*. Sometimes we were joined by the

neighbors' boys. In winter they would be the first to venture onto the thin ice of the pond. If they were in a friendly mood, they'd invite us to come along, and we'd join them in leaping from the barn attic into a huge heap of hay below, in petting the young rabbits or sliding down the snow-covered hill in the chicken yard.

Life changed in the fourth grade when we had to attend Thomas Müntzer Middle School. Located in the neighboring city, it was reached by the school bus that always seemed to leave way too early, especially in winter when it was still dark in the morning. Thomas Müntzer had been adopted by the system as an early hero carrying the ideals of the communist world revolution. In the intimidating building that bore his name, we were prepped for a future whereby the blue countries on the map – the capitalist ones – would soon be as red as the others. As predicted by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the "workers of the world" would eventually unite and defeat the imperialists.

I had always hoped for the end of the world to arrive before fourth grade. However, I was to be disappointed. We, the village children, especially the religious ones, would have to fight our own battles of survival in the hostile environment of the city school – studying twice as hard as everyone else; impressing the teachers with a particularly diligent regurgitation of last lesson's subject or by volunteering for the odd jobs – collecting the students' contributions for the "*Trommel*," or "Drum," as the monthly publication of the communist "Young Pioneers" was called, or by updating the school's bulletin board.

Simultaneously it was crucial to ingratiate ourselves with the students wearing "pioneer scarves" around their necks that made their lives so much easier. We'd always strive to be a little better prepared than everyone else and to share our knowledge. The hardest challenge was not to stick out during the so-called "Citizenship" lessons. A lack of conviction while reciting the socialist confessions of faith could lead to precarious interrogations that would continue until the teacher had sufficiently enjoyed the uneasiness of the queried church child before seeking out another victim. From early on, fear became a familiar companion the moment we left the safety of our apartment for the day's business. God forbid we say anything wrong that might endanger our parents. Better not say anything at all.

Even our sports classes were politically tinged. In the higher grades, dummy hand grenades were used in place of a shotput. Of course we didn't know it at the time. My vague memories from those years in the neighborhood of *Rußdorf* (Soot Town) all have the same color – a bleak, oppressive shade of gray.

Refuge was to be found on *Kirchberg*, Chapel Hill. During the summer, huge tents were erected by the local church. People would come to these retreats from all over the republic. There would be homemade raspberry lemonade for the kids served in pink and blue plastic cups.

And there were the *Kinderstunde*, Children's Hours. Sister Christine, who always radiated goodness, would again somehow manage to get arts and crafts materials from the West, and we would feel incredibly privileged. Sometimes she would take a 10-minute hike with us to the nearby parish woods. We would build moss houses, spread cut apples and butter-smeared flat-bread sandwiches from the picnic basket onto a plastic tablecloth and listen to the birds sing.

On special days when a couple of the older children were present, we were allowed to sail down the hand-operated rope winch from the big tree across the pond and into the meadow where someone would catch us. It was the great freedom of our childhood years.

The church hall, gravitation point of all our endeavors, was always filled with an atmosphere of life, even when no one was there. Here is where "Uncle Klaus," the cantor, would rehearse the pieces for the following Sunday's church service with us, the young members of the *Kurrende* choir, accompanied by a cembalo that substituted for the organ and produced very precise tones for study purposes.

And once a year during my birthday month, September, the hall would be filled for days with the aroma of freshly cut Thuja evergreen branches as women of the congregation turned a sea of flowers into colorful wreaths and garlands for the German Thanksgiving holiday.

The AWG apartment in Grüna, with its ticking living room clock and Grandma's *Interlok* sewing machine in the guest room, was another place of great attraction for us. Here we were watched over by two loving pensioners who wanted only the best for us. Grandpa would often improve our open-faced sandwiches by adding another layer of butter or cold cuts, making the topping thicker than the bread.

The evening TV hour would begin around 7 o'clock. We looked forward to the moment when Grandpa would turn on "the box" with great expectation as we didn't have a "box" at home. There was the children's program "*Sandmännchen*" (Little Sandman); and when everything was going well, we would be allowed to stay up for Grandpa's favorites. Grandpa even dared turning on "West TV" – West German programs such as "*Dalli, Dalli!*" (colloquial for fast) featuring Hans Rosenthal, noting, "He is Jewish," followed by a respectful nod of the head; or "*Dick und Doof*" (Laurel and Hardy). And when the blood was flowing in a Western, Grandpa would hurry to assure his granddaughters with a laugh, "Oh, don't worry – it's only jam." We never quite believed him.

We were the luckiest whenever Grandpa disappeared into the kitchen during the breaks, only to return with the red plastic dessert bowls filled with vanilla ice cream and canned strawberries (naturally homemade), complete with a slim waffle.

The most frequent destination of our field trips was Grandpa's garden. There we would fill our little buckets with huge, sweet raspberries, which Grandpa had tied up to grow along the fence. "Duck your head," we would be told as we stepped into the greenhouse. Grandpa had built it from scratch. We would enter a tropical paradise where everything grew that we would later eat for dinner.

Eventually Grandpa would walk through the flowerbed with a sharp garden knife in his hand. "Here, hold this." His gladiolas were orange, pink, white and yellow. There were always gladiolas growing in Grandpa's garden, almost as tall as we were.

Grandpa with gladiola, 1980s

Grandpa was an atheist; at least he didn't believe in anything officially. He was simply … well, what actually? A baker, way back when; a grinder in a socialist workers' factory until retirement; hobby gardener. For us, he was simply Opa.

Occasionally we would ask him something about the war. But we'd quickly leave that topic alone; it made him cry.

In Grandpa's garage, which also served as a workshop, were two photographs hanging by the entrance. One showed him with his carrier pigeons, one with his horse, Felix. Both photos dated back to a time of which we had no access. We had to live with the fact that Grandpa and Grandma Meieranz had a strange last name and no past.

People in our Protestant church had come across the fact that most books of the Bible were set in an ancient land called Israel and had much to say about its inhabitants. Consequently we grew up with a deep love for those people.

When Dad's Bible lay open on the kitchen table, we would wonder at his exotic bookmark. It had red embroidered borders and showed scenes from the Holy Land. Friends from the "West" had given it to him. "Wailing Wall," "Shrine of the Book," "Knesset" – these terms, seemingly originating somewhere beyond the Arabian Nights, along with names such as Yitzhak Shamir resounded in my parents' daily lunchtime prayer for the peace of Jerusalem.

While my sister would cycle up and down our main village street and be praised by Mom for another successful shopping trip to our Konsum store, I needed books to escape the borders of our East German reality. Even a mental trip beyond the unyielding boundary of the German Democratic Republic was a liberating experience. Corresponding with a pen pal in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk carried the air of boldness; we naturally studied Russian at school. I dreamed of trips and adventures. When a new law was passed that permitted severely handicapped people to take an accompanying adult on travels to the capitalist West, I remember standing in the kitchen with Dad, who was affected by this new regulation, longingly counting the years until my 18th birthday. The new law would enable us to see our friends who had been

faithfully sending us the priceless "Parcels from the West" every Christmas.

A few months later, for the first time ever, my parents received permission to visit West Germany. I was to guard the house and invited my best friend for company. My parents never listened to the radio – why spend money on government propaganda. But my friend was somewhat more progressive, and we felt rather grown-up when we turned on the news while spreading liver pate on our sandwiches.

Suddenly we heard something that sounded different from the usual commonplace phrases.

"Hungary is opening its borders to Austria. People are flooding into Hungary …." It was only to be a few more weeks before people were able to reach their destination in West Germany without this detour.

Even today, more than a quarter of a century later, writing these words gives me goosebumps. And that's an understatement. Actually it brings tears to my eyes, every single time.

At the time we hardly understood the historic dimension of the events that followed and eventually resulted in German reunification less than a year later. Far out in the country, political involvement was a rarity. The weekly public Monday meetings in the city of Leipzig, where protesters would chant, "Wir sind ein Volk" (We are one people) were far away.

The predominant sensation I remember from those days is … fear. What if the Russian tanks received orders? What if this was a trap? What if "them up there" just wanted to see where people's loyalties lay in order to subsequently launch a massive counterrevolution against all freedom enthusiasts? The plans were lying ready on the table. Half a million Soviet soldiers were then stationed in our small 16-million-person republic. Our state claimed the most comprehensive surveillance network of agent per capita worldwide. For weeks, for months, we barely dared breathe.

Eventually Dad took us to West Berlin anyway, where one of his aunts lived. It was before Christmas. The whole city was decorated. We found ourselves in one huge dazzling dream – the flood of lights

at the Kaufhof mall, the beautiful and confident people all around, the hot chocolate served by the Salvation Army on the snowed-in sidewalk – all for free.

We received our "welcome money" – the unfathomable amount of DM 100 – a generous initiative of West Germany to welcome its speechless neighbors into the capitalist half of the country. We put it to use right away. One brother became rich by buying a toolset, another carried an aquarium to our Trabbi car. My sister, Cornelia, and I put our fortune in a white envelope and slid it into a donation box for a charity in Israel. No one talked us into it. For the first time we had something "real" to sacrifice – and the feeling of being part of something bigger than ourselves.

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LAND OF THE FATHERS

For my first flight ever, I was given a window seat on the Arkia airplane – left side, row 23. It grew progressively darker as we passed over the Alps, and I nodded off.

As the pressure in the plane increased, the pounding of my heart rang in my ears. Below me, from out of the darkness, twinkled the lights of Tel Aviv like an amber-colored necklace laid out all along the Mediterranean coast. Within minutes my feet would touch the hallowed ground.

As I walked down the gangway into the Israeli night, I was greeted with a blast of humid air. A few meters in front of me was the palm-tree-framed airport terminal, which greets new arrivals with "Brukhim ha'baim" for "Welcome." I had arrived to the great freedom. "If you will it, it is no dream," as Theodor Herzl, the father of modern-day Israel, seemed to call to me as well.

Simultaneously, already a world away, Grandpa and Grandma squeezed onto the back seat of our East German Trabbi car on their way to Sunday afternoon coffee. There would be fruit pie, mom's specialty, with symmetrically arranged fruit slices. During the half-hour car ride, Mom played a newly obtained Israeli folk music tape and solemnly announced that "Anemone has arrived safely in Israel," moving Grandpa and Grandma to tears.

Today I can't even remember how it all began. Maybe it started with the visitors from Israel – musicians, speakers, friends – who suddenly started appearing among our little Protestant congregation. For years, for decades, the monthly newsletters with tidings from Israel, printed in nine-point type, had been passed around among church members. We felt bound to the fate of this nation – the elderly, who had witnessed its rebirth from afar shortly after the horrors of World War II and the near-extermination of the Jewish people, and the youth, who were drawn to this enigmatic country.

The haunting melodies of the Eastern European *shtetl* became entangled in my heart, and one day I bought a book that had been prohibited under Communist rule – "Exodus" by Leon Uris.

It took me two nights to devour this novel about the founding of the State of Israel and the many trials and tribulations preceding that moment. After finishing the book, I knew that one day I too would visit. I, the *shiksa*[1] from the land of the barbarians, had to find them – Ari, Tzvi and whomever else. I had to take my affection for this unique people and put it to work on the ground of this land.

Statue of Theodor Herzl, visionary and father of modern-day Israel, in "Mini Israel," a leisure park near Latrun, Israel.

While my classmates researched potential colleges, I went to the Israeli consulate for information on spending a year abroad in Israel. I really wanted to go to a kibbutz. What better place to learn Hebrew and to find Ari?

But things turned out differently. One day a brochure about Beit Eliezer, a senior citizen home for Holocaust survivors in the north of Israel, arrived by mail. I couldn't get it out of my mind. At the same

[1] Yiddish for: Non-Jewish woman

time, I felt torn by what appeared to be divine providence and my kibbutz ideas. The thought of taking my first steps into long-awaited freedom, only to end up on a conservative, German-Yiddish speaking Swabian island in northern Israel made me cringe.

Two days later I took the booklet to my room in the attic and gave the photos a closer look. All at once I realized that I was looking into the faces of the Aris and Tzvis in old age – the brave kibbutzniks of the first generation who had arrived from Europe, often the only members of their family to have survived – who went on to build the nation of Israel. These elderly senior citizens quickly stole my heart, and my decision was sealed.

"We prayed for Israel our whole lives," some of the older church members from my congregation professed as they saw me off on my trip. "Now we have grown old and can no longer travel easily. But you are young – go as our ambassador."

All the volunteers came from Germany. Being representatives of the nation of the perpetrators, we wanted to bring some good to these tortured souls, who were still confronting nightmares in their golden years. We cooked and cleaned for our seniors, washed, sang and planted flowers for them; pushed them through the park in their wheelchairs and listened to their stories.

I worked primarily in the kitchen. I was taught the secrets of Swabian cuisine, learned to estimate portions for 60 diners and mastered sending the dishes through the steaming dishwasher in an hour without suffering a heat stroke.

Every Friday night we would set the tables in the different wards, light the candles and celebrate Shabbat with the residents. We would bless and break the bread together, pass around the cup of sweet Kiddush wine and sing the traditional songs of old to welcome the Sabbath.

Some residents were open and funny and visibly enjoyed the company of the young volunteers. Some had learned German in the concentration camps. Other seniors didn't speak a word with anyone; their bitter experiences had turned them mute. They came to Beit Eliezer primarily because they knew they would receive quality care.

Mr. Weinwurm, one of the Holocaust survivors

Mrs. Gutman was one of the older residents who could not be reached by any friendly word, look or gesture when the staff went around the table wishing every resident a happy Shabbat. For hours, days, weeks she would simply sit there staring at the floor.

Then the day came when she looked up and uttered a soft-spoken "Shabbat Shalom," followed by a tentative smile. Love began healing her heart.

I often joined Tzvi on the patio on Sabbath afternoons where sunlight fell through the green roof and danced across the plastic tablecloth and patio tiles. Tzvi was so kind. Sometimes I pushed him through the blooming garden in his wheelchair. He was always happy to see me, and from time to time he would share memories in his broken German. Tzvi came from Lodz. He had been a young boy when the war broke out. He survived – the only one in his family – hidden by a Catholic nun.

When my year abroad came to an end, I knew I would come back. I had made friends, and I had come to know a chaotic, lovable country packed with history from the distant past to the present. I wanted to do something with my life that would keep me in touch with Israel – perhaps studying languages. The Hebrew language program at Leipzig University had been removed from the curriculum. However, after the opening of the Soviet borders, one could now converse in Russian with an increasing number of newly

arrived immigrants to Israel. Maybe I could get a head start in Heidelberg, Germany's dream of a student city. By studying Russian, a language I somewhat knew from my school years in East Germany, I could skip ahead one semester.

When I arrived back in Germany, Grandpa had just suffered a stroke. Before I entered his hospital room, I cautioned myself to be careful. *Don't expect too much. Speak slowly.*

"You're back, girl!" he exclaimed, beaming a radiant smile. *Good.* He was awake, but speaking was difficult for him.

I gave him a hug, carefully sat down at his bedside and opened my Israel photo book to the first page.

Opa followed my report with great interest, gazing intently at each image. "Girl, these are memories no one can take from you," he exclaimed again and again.

Of course not – why would someone wish to take them from me?

Then he came to my favorite page – the postcard depicting three Israeli soldiers, guns over their shoulders, praying at the Western Wall of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

When he saw the photo, Opa broke out in a sob.

With a decisive gesture, he closed the album and decided, "Enough for today."

Postcard from my Israel photo album.
Photo by Sandu Mandrea, Palphot Ltd., Israel

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To my recollection it rained unceasingly the first weeks in Heidelberg. I felt terribly homesick for Israel. I hated being German. *Didn't I have a distant Jewish grandmother somewhere, as Israelis often surmised, unable to imagine that a German would come to volunteer in Israel just like that?* I registered for a Hebrew class at the Jewish Institute. Occasionally on Friday nights I went to the local synagogue together with a fellow student from my Russian classes. We absorbed the atmosphere and pretended to know where we were in the prayer book.

Two years later I found myself abroad again. I wanted to improve my Russian, write my graduation paper and help Ukrainian Jews return to the land of their forefathers, now that the Iron Curtain was history and the residents of the former Soviet Union were finally able to go where they wanted – for the first time in 70 years.

Exobus, an international volunteer organization, maintained an office in Kharkov. There, in one of Eastern Ukraine's mega cities whose names are familiar only to World War II veterans, my three emerging foreign languages came together for the first time. I spoke Russian with the locals and members of the dispersed Jewish community, English with the volunteers, and my beginner's level Hebrew with the staff of the Jewish Agency.

My sister, Cornelia, simultaneously volunteered with the same organization in the western part of Ukraine. In between preparing lunch packages for the bus drivers from a dozen European countries, she would also go on "reys," trips helping repatriates from Vinnitsa, Kiev and Lvov with their typical red-and-blue-checkered plastic bags on their way to the airport. She would serve them coffee while traveling in the organization's airport coach, reminding them of the ancient prophet's words that had outlasted Stalin and his successors: "See, I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers and women in labor; a great throng will return."[2]

[2] The Bible, Book of Jeremiah 31, Vers 8

At times, we would visit small towns that didn't have a Jewish Agency point of contact. We would say a short prayer and then start asking around at the next perimeter fence. "Yes, there is someone," we would be told in response. An hour later the living room of that "someone" would fill up, and we would show videos of Israel, the country that members of their grandfathers' generation, fleeing from pogroms and revolutionary upheaval in the fading Czar's empire, had helped construct. Now that the gates of Mother Russia had opened, some 70 years later, Israel once again offered a perspective – "a country where no one will ask me what I am doing here," as one individual expressed after making up his mind to leave for the promised land.

Market day in winter. Kharkov, Ukraine

On another occasion, the small hall of the House of Culture in a remote town was packed by the time we arrived. We were looking into faces marked by the hardships of life; people who, judging by their apparent age, had seen the Nazis and the Stalinists; who could tell a personal story of famines and indescribable repressions. And here we were, two third-generation granddaughters from the other side of the fence, professing a message of reconciliation, hope and new beginnings.

Was his name Arkady? The elderly gentleman disappeared immediately following our presentation, only to return after 10 minutes. Overcoming a moment of hesitation, he stepped forward and presented each of us with a bouquet of flowers. In keeping with the latest fashion, they were wrapped in expensive plastic foil and must have cost him a fortune.

Then he hugged us. "You are the first Germans I have embraced in my life," he declared.

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We haven't seen Grandpa and Grandma for a while. This thought still crosses my mind on occasion. We shared everything with them. When they were getting shaky on their feet and our joint excursions were limited to the garden across the street, they started going on virtual trips with us grandchildren, accompanying us with good wishes and an inexhaustible interest in our reports.

Kharkov, yes; Grandpa knew the name of the city where I had studied and volunteered – from the war. But what really shook him up were my sister's reports from her volunteer work in the western part of Ukraine. He got particularly emotional when she told him about a Holocaust survivor from Vinnitsa who decided to leave for the "Promised Land" at the proud age of 100 years, my sister having taken him all the way to the check-in desk of the Israeli El Al airline. Or when she told him about a trip to Kiev where they were invited to a hearty farewell gathering with many neighbors, lots of vodka and tons of food.

"In Kiev …," was as far as Grandpa would get before bursting into tears. "That's where I ran for my life!"

"Anyone care for another cup of malt coffee?" Grandma would inquire, putting an end to the topic.

Opa. On a September day in 2000 – it was Israel Sunday in the annual church calendar – Grandpa failed to open the door when my brother knocked to pick him up for lunch. He had died peacefully. In the last few years after Grandma's sudden passing, he had

been able to let go of much of his bitterness and had made peace with God, people and his own story.

I was on my way back from Israel. Another dream had come true. I had received a stipend for a six-week Hebrew language class at Beersheva University situated in the middle of the desert.

Now it was time to write job applications, one of which led me into the arms of the American Forces, who were then still a significant presence in the German state of Hessen. I felt in the right place from day one. *Strange,* I thought. *Grandpa had spent two years in the United States as an American prisoner of war, and now here I was working alongside them.* But it really wasn't a contradiction. Whenever Grandpa spoke of the Americans, his face lit up, such as when he told us with a grin how he went "on the boat" in Italy after he had surrendered, how he succeeded in bringing his sick comrade Jim along with onto the boat, and how lucky he was to be put in the kitchen thanks to his training as a baker. He also described how he smuggled bananas out in his soldier boots, helping save "Uncle Jim's" life.

Now that I was going to set up camp in the Rhine Main Area, many new friends – especially those from America – helped me discover that Germany was also beautiful, from the Rheingau Region to our capital, "Bear-linn." While I, like many of my fellow German citizens, thought of Hitler and our shameful national history when thinking of Germany, many Americans first thought of Luther, Bach and Daimler-Benz.

I kept meeting people at international conferences who said they loved Germany as much as I loved Israel, and who wanted to see my nation step out of the shadows of its past and once again become a blessing for other nations – especially for Israel. Germany, of all nations.

With this hopeful outlook I began reconciling myself to my nationality and to my present status.

The first American colleagues who went out to lunch with me were – Jewish. It just happened that way. I wasn't looking for these contacts. They just came to me – in Budapest, in Frankfurt, in Baltimore and in Prague.

My parents moved to western Germany and then relocated three years later – this time to the fertile landscape around Magdeburg. Whatever Mom put into the ground grew skyward within a heartbeat. Gladiolas and sweet peas bloomed just like in Grandpa's old garden. My two youngest siblings grew up as citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany. We, the older siblings, were the old-timers who told them how things used to be. With all the freedom of movement they were born into, they loved their home state more than any other place.

Mom had met many of her relatives for the first time at Grandpa's grave. The circle of people Opa had granted access to his personal life had been limited. Most of his seven siblings and their descendants had been excluded from his contact. One brother had helped build the Berlin wall and defended it to the end; one sister had married a military SS officer during the war, another had become the personal assistant of the party secretary of the GDR's Council of Ministers. Opa had sent them all packing. His youngest brother, who had escaped East Germany to Hamburg just before the country was sealed off, and a sister who had lived in his hometown had been the only relatives allowed to visit him. For Grandpa's funeral, however, my parents had tried to reach all the remaining brothers and sisters.

Grandpa (left) with his siblings at a family anniversary, approx. 1960

And they came. Times had changed; the old family grievances had faded with the passing of time. It was a kind of redemption, Mom told us, having grown up lonely as a single child and having lost her last close relative when her brother died due to alcoholism.

As the years progressed, Aunt Inge from Berlin, who had been ostracized because of her GDR career, became a close confident. Mom enjoyed having her rediscovered aunt nearby.

A few weeks before Aunt Inge's sudden death, Mom spoke with her by phone. At some point the conversation turned to the Meieranz, "those wandering birds."

"Actually I know nothing about my family," Mom said with regret.

"Well, the Meieranz came from Poland," said Aunt Inge. "You do know that, don't you? They were from Lodz, and your grandfather came from a family of Jewish fabric makers."

Then the line fell silent.

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