

The German Unger Story

In 1937 my father, his brother, their parents and their maternal grandparents escaped from Nazi Germany, just as the ports were closing to civilian travel. This is not their story as they had a family that survived to remember them. This is the story of the other Ungers, the family that it has taken us 70 years to piece together most of the information on their fate.

In February 2011 The Listener published an article about Diana Wichtel's journey to the death camps her father survived. In that article a reference was made to the International Tracing Service, whom I contacted. 6 months later they provided another tiny piece of evidence of the fate of my family. At a time when the world is tuning in to the trials of the 2nd worst European murders of all time, it is timely to remember the worst genocide, and the faces of some who did not survive.

In 1937 my father, his brother, their parents and their maternal grandparents escaped from Nazi Germany, just as the ports were closing to civilian travel. This is not their story as they had a family that survived to remember them. This is the story of the other Ungers, the family that it has taken us 70 years to piece together most of the information on their fate.

My father's Uncle Martin was born in Środa Wielkopolska when it was part of Poland in 1891, a little brother to my grandfather Bruno. It had a very small community of Jews, less than 1% of the district. By one of those strange historical twists, Arthur Greiser was also borne in this tiny town 6 years later. Greiser went on to become one of the prime enactors of the holocaust in Poland, and was to be hung after being tried at the Polish Supreme National Tribunal for war crimes in 1946. One wonders if the two families ever met.

At some stage the Ungers, including my Grandfather Bruno, made the move that so many urbane Jews did, to Berlin, where they developed their trades. Martin was an importer of Persian carpets, and he apparently had a comfortable income. The Unger family were fully "integrated" Jews, seeing themselves as Germans first and foremost. No-one can ever really know another's true belief system, but they lived a largely secular life, just attending the major festivals at the synagogue at Oranienburger Tor . The brothers both fought in the Great War for their fatherland, Martin much decorated as a machine gunner, and Bruno earning the Iron Cross, a decoration which may have eventually contributed to saving his life.

It must have been a strange existence against a backdrop of revolution and growing repression, and my father used to talk of the anxiety that was always there. But life had its normal stages, and Martin married Margarete Levy, a native Berliner 11 years his junior. They made their home at 122 Kantsrasse in Charlottenberg, a leafy and wealthy part of Berlin. It was within walking distance to the Tiergarten and the Olympic Stadium, from which they must have heard the crowds at Hitler's 1936 Olympics. The Fuhrer paused in his actions against the Jews before the games so as not to alarm international opinion, but the respite was short.

In 1936 my Grandfather was summoned for questioning to the Braune Haus, the Nazi Headquarters in Berlin. Despite being convinced his status as a front line soldier on the Eastern fronts, and an escapee from a Russian POW camp after which he returned to the front gave him some security, he was still Jewish and vulnerable. We believe his wearing of his Iron Cross, the same decoration Hitler proudly wore, perhaps spared him. However he became terrified, and my grandmother, Ruth, convinced the family to leave. As he was a qualified dentist, the theory was he could get out, and then fetch the extended family.

Martin remained and waited. In 1938 Evelyne Dorit Unger was born, and was joined by her sister, Lane, on 23rd March 1942.

It is impossible to know what their lives must have been like at this time. We know they were still in the family home, at least at times, from the last correspondence the New Zealand Ungers received, dated 27th December 1942. They would all have the yellow star on their clothes, made compulsory in 1941, and their movement would have become more and more restricted as parts of the city were declared off limits to Jews. They would have walked the streets in the shadows of the burnt synagogues and Jewish businesses. Little Lane, we were told, looked very much like my Grandfather. In that same letter he also implied that they were living apart from the children, but still saw them sometimes. All we can assume is that they were being used as part of the 15,000 Jewish forced labourers in the city, helping to build Hitler's "World Capital Germania".

We do not know when, but at some point the entire family were taken into custody and moved to Iranischestrasse 2, known then as it is today as the Jewish Hospital. This imposing structure was one of several designated by the city authorities to gather and billet Jews until it was efficient to transport them away from the city, in batches of about 1,000 people. In 1945 as the Russians entered the city, this was the only surviving enclave of Jews in Berlin, the advancing armies finding 800 Jews hiding in the walls.

On the 17th March 1943 the Ungers were deported by the "Geheime Staatspolizei / Staatspolizeileitstelle Berlin", known to us as the Gestapo. They were transported from Berlin to the Theresienstadt Camp, on the 4th transport. The transport was labelled "for aged people". Martin was listed as a "worker", his wife a "householder". It was 6 days before Lane's first birthday.

Theresienstadt is in what was then the occupied Czech Republic. It was originally designated to house privileged Jews as another holding pen as the war, and the mechanisations of war, progressed. By the time my Uncle and his family arrived, control had passed to the Waffen-SS. To contrast the fates of the willing versus the unwilling inhabitants, the Camp commandant at the time was Anton Burger, a Major in the SS. Immediately after the war he went into hiding under a false name, and lived until the age of 81, dying still in hiding in 1994.

It is estimated 140,000 Jews went through Theresienstadt, including 15,000 children, 2 of them my cousins. It was a Nazi propaganda camp – neither a concentration camp nor a ghetto, but a temporary settlement. In 1944 the Danish Red Cross were invited in to inspect it. They were shown freshly painted rooms, and a street of shops that were only facades constructed by Czech inmates. Prisoners were forbidden to answer their questions.

Also in 1944, the inmates were made to make a propaganda movie on the camp to show the benevolence of the Nazi state on Jews. Maybe the Ungers were glimpsed in it. Who knows, maybe they met Malva Schalek, a Jewish painter who drew some of the most poignant portraits of Jewish life during the war, and was in Theresienstadt until her death in 1944.

To maintain this pretence of a happy home, numbers had to be kept low. The German state was also accelerating its ambition to have Europe "Judenrein" (Jew Free) before the Reich's now apparently inevitable collapse. On the 28th September 1944 Martin was loaded onto Transport EK, number 656, and was taken to Concentration Camp Auschwitz in Nazi annexed Poland, or Upper Silesia, 363 km away from his family.

What would have happened to Martin then is too awful to imagine, but there, Martin Unger died. We will never know how exactly, but the portrait of death was quite consistent at this time in the camps history. Jews were offloaded a very small number selected for work on the ramp at Birkenau, and the rest deceived into the chambers. In one recounting, Camp Guard Franz Hossler told the prisoners it was a labour camp as they undressed, and asked diabetics to report to staff after their baths.

18,402 prisoners were taken in this final push from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz, leaving only 11,077 in the model camp. Of them, only 1,574 survived the war.

The Governor of the area, Karl Hanke, was at the time of my Great-Uncle's death preparing for his wedding to Baroness Freda von Fircks, with whom he had been having an affair for a long period and had fathered a daughter in December 1943. He was later promoted by Hitler as the Russians advanced through Germany to Reichsführer-SS, replacing Heinrich Himmler.

In May 1944 the commandant Arthur Liebehenschel (who was to be executed in 1948 after the Auschwitz trials in Poland) was replaced by the original architect of the gas chambers, Rudolf Höss, who had masterminded their building, and lived with his family in close proximity. After the war Höss similarly was caught after a significant hunt by the British, and gave evidence at the Nuremberg trials before being passed to the Polish authorities. During his trial when accused of murdering three and a half million people, Höss replied it had only been two and a half million, the rest being attributed to starvation. He too was executed.

But this was after liberation. In Theresienstadt the surviving German Ungers were to know none of this. The camp was busy, as it was the final period of the "Autumn Transports 1944" They would have waited for the events to seize them, as they did only 8 days after Martin had been taken. Margarete, Evelyne and Lane were loaded on transports, this time train Eo, as numbers 636, 637, and 638. The 3 Ungers, mother and daughters, were together as they took the same journey as Martin had into the Polish Autumn. The International Tracing Service has just provided us with their Otransport papers. Their final transport was simply categorised as "Jew".

And there, without any doubt, Margarete and little Lane died, we just hope as quickly and as peacefully as could be, rather than endure any more of the horror they must have been living through. Lane was 2 ½, and had never really ever known freedom, and one suspects, precious little happiness. We hope they died together and with the same dignity the surviving Ungers in New Zealand were able to live their lives.

103 days later Auschwitz was liberated. The population of New Zealand at the time was 1,700,000. While disputed, the death toll at Auschwitz is estimated by the records of Yad Vashim to be 1,400,000 people. 3 of them carried my name.

The Unger history in Europe did not end there. In June 1947 the New Zealand Ungers received a letter dated the 23rd March 1947 from a man in Tel Aviv, then part of Palestine. The letter was sent to the "NZ Board of Jewish Committee" and miraculously found my grandparents. The writer, a Paul Rohrlich blandly stated that his sister had been a POW in Wyazma, Smolensk, Russia. There, in 1944, she had met a girl named Evelyne Unger, aged 10 – 12 years old. When asked if she had any relatives she talked of a Dr Unger in New Zealand, her uncle.

Of course this set off a frenzy of letter writing and introductions, which was a painfully slow process. The Russians were not the document keepers the Germans had been, and they lived in a climate of fear where they would not reveal names. A letter would take 6 months to reach

the recipient, and was normally responded to with an obligatory apology but no new information. The whole of Europe was in upheaval and one little girl was caught in the tide.

From what we have, we can only guess at how this remarkable story may have unfolded. Somehow Evelyne was separated from her mother and sister at some time, despite getting on the transport together. Whether it was by accident or design, who could guess. The German guards had no respect for the dignity of the victims, and it was likely just a result of masses of people being treated like stock. It was a time when men like Josef Mengele stood on the arrival ramp at Auschwitz, and directed some to the left for whatever reasons, and the rest to the right, to their certain deaths.

When the last Ungers arrived at the camp, the war was going very badly for the Nazis, and there is evidence that they seconded Jewish doctors and nurses to take to the Eastern front to treat the German wounded. If the thin leads we have are correct, Evelyne was taken by a Dr Erika Modldamer-Rohrlich or one of the other women with her to the front lines to save her from the gas chambers. The Germans left these Jews behind at the front in their retreat. Possession of the dispossessed Jews was then passed to the Russians, and they were put in the POW camp.

In the aftermath of the war Jews gained a sort of collective soul, which led to sharing of experiences, and everyone desperately trying to track their family. People talked in detail and recorded all they could to remember and preserve something of the lives of so many. By an almost unbelievable coincidence 2 years later, Paul Rohrlich's son met a man on the way to Jerusalem who recognised his last name from a letter he had seen in a refugee camp in the hands of a Mr Lesckinsky. This letter was from that man's brother, who was a captain in the Red Army, and a Jew. It said "I am in command of the POW Camp in Wyazma and have seen the following prisoners, 1944, who requested to send greeting. Dr Molddamer-Rohrlich to her brother in Palestine, Evelyne Unger to her uncle in New Zealand..." and 3 other names.

Every attempt was made to find Evelyne for the next 50 years. Despite the desperate search, no other information was ever found, and the eventual fate of Paul Rohrlich's sister and my grandfather's niece are permanently lost in the turmoil that followed.

My father dreamed of finding Evelyne. It is probable she would have died in the months leading to the end of the war, or the immediate aftermath, as she was alone, no doubt malnourished, and a burden to all in the rapidly changing events. She was just another little Jewish girl in a world both struggling to come to terms with the Holocaust, and to deny humanity's cruelty to its weakest.

Had she survived, she would likely have been taken into Russia or maybe even Israel. She would have had her name changed, and possibly quite quickly forgot about her Uncle ever rescuing her. Or she, like my father, may have dreamed of being found. The image of a little girl with building blocks is too haunting to ignore or forget. That girl would now be 73. If she is alive, we share a link that is deeper than knowing each other – we share a families survival against the darkest forces our world has ever known.

Sometimes history is portrayed as being about numbers. It is not. It is about people, and the way their story is remembered.

Post Script:

The search for this information has been long. The Jewish support organisations around the world have taken huge steps in remembering the victims of the Holocaust as people, not numbers. The Central Database of Shoah Victims Names provided by Yad Vashim was an incredible realisation to the level of information available about so many people. The final information, and Lane's effective death certificate, came to us from the International Tracing Service in Germany.

My father also kept extensive records of his unsuccessful search for Evelyne.