

**GOOD NEIGHBORS,  
BAD TIMES**

Echoes of My Father's German Village

M I M I S C H W A R T Z

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## CONTENTS

List of Illustrations xiii

Author's Note xv

### PART ONE Close to Home

- 1 Treadmill to the Past 3
- 2 Anonymous Translation 8
- 3 At the *Nachmittag* 17
- 4 Kaffeeklatsch 24
- 5 Joie de Vivre 35
- 6 Four Stories of the Torah 48
- 7 The Revolving Room 59

### PART TWO An Ocean Away

- 8 Off the Record 75
- 9 A Little Respect, Please 95
- 10 The Good Raincoat 102
- 11 Hedwig, Fritz, and "Schtumpela" 113
- 12 The Second Generation 122

### PART THREE Back and Forth

- 13 Willy from Baltimore 139
- 14 Five Kilometers Away 151

- 15 Katherine of Dorn 164
- 16 Truth Transposed 175
- 17 What Willy's Neighbor Says . . . 177
- 18 The Red Album 180
- 19 Where Legend Ends 193
- 20 At My Father's Grave 203

PART FOUR End Points

- 21 The Other Miriam 213
- 22 Three Little Girls 221
- 23 Yes or No? 234
- 24 The Celebration 243

Acknowledgments 259

## ILLUSTRATIONS

*Following page 66*

1. The village Torah, rescued by the Christians during Kristallnacht.
2. The author's father, Arthur Loewengart, with his brother Sol.
3. Jewish families from the village that escaped the Nazis.
4. Hannah as a girl in the village.
5. The Jews in the fire brigade, circa 1931.
6. The inside of the synagogue.

*Following page 130*

7. The black swastika erected by the Nazis in 1934.
8. The white cross that replaced the swastika after the war.
9. The entrance to the synagogue.
10. *Berches*, the potato bread that everyone remembers.
11. The Jewish cemetery in the woods above the village.
12. The tree Anna planted in the Jewish cemetery.

*Following page 206*

13. Jewish cattle dealer with prize bull, circa 1920.
14. The farmer's daughter who refused to join the girls' Nazi Youth group.
15. Jewish school class in the 1880s.
16. Jewish school class in 1937.
17. Building the new village in the sands of Eretz Israel, 1937.
18. The author at her father's grave.
19. Two Jews from Israel at the Day of Remembering, 2002.
20. Jews and Christians at a memorial service, 2004.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a book of the small stories, the ones that history has no time for as it paints the broad brushstrokes of the past. These stories, I found, often lead to the big stories about Good, Evil, Truth, Bravery, and Denial—and, in my case, helped me to sort what I discovered to be true from the more official Truths of a world I inherited, but never knew firsthand.

That world is a little village of Christians and Jews in southwest Germany, sixty kilometers from Stuttgart. Some stories I heard as a child in Queens, New York—told by a father who remembered a pre-Hitler life in a place “where everyone got along.” Other stories came later, and one in midlife—again about decent Christian neighbors, but during the Nazi years—set me on a twelve-year quest on three continents to find out more. By then my father and his family had died, so these stories come, mostly, from villagers I’d never met before: both the Jews who fled from the Nazis and their Christian neighbors, still in the village today. All welcomed me into their kitchens and living rooms as “die Tochter von Artur Loewengart” (the daughter of Arthur Loewengart), a family they remembered well. And plying me with coffee and home-baked German goodies, the ones I loved as a child in Queens, they opened the albums of their lives with unexpected generosity.

“Don’t be naïve!” warned Holocaust scholars at my college where I’ve taught writing for twenty years. “Trust the records, not what people tell you! People are unreliable, contradictory!”

But as storyteller, not historian, I liked how one person's memory bumped another, muddying the moral waters of easy judgment. I liked how the same landscape of images—the white cross, the black swastika, the burning synagogue, the fresh-baked *Berches* and linzertorte—kept reappearing, no matter who was talking. And how the many angles of vision, taken collectively, made my father's village real for me: a blend of fact, myth, and memory that I could reclaim, at least a little bit.

The people I met, the stories they told, the facts of village life and history, are true as I learned them. Nothing is made up—except for people's names, the name of the village, two other place names, and some identifying details that I changed to protect the privacy of the nonfamous. They include farmers, tradesmen, factory workers, teachers, and civil servants. Many are old-timers (Catholics and Jews) with long family histories in the village; some are “newcomers” (Protestants and Muslims) who came after World War II; some well-off, some poor; some educated, many not going beyond the eight years of the local *Volksschule*. One survived a concentration camp; one had a Nazi father and grandfather; one was a Jewish daughter who escaped while her mother had to stay behind; one was a Catholic boy in Hitler's army who now spends his retirement years doing research on local Jewish history. And many others, people neither heroic nor evil, whose lives and struggles let me reenter my father's old world and walk around for a while with you, my reader—as if it were ours.

*Mimi Schwartz*

## I | TREADMILL TO THE PAST

Fragile black lines on shades of green. A handful of tilting houses, a church bell tower, rolling meadow, forest. This little watercolor hanging above my father's side of the bed in Queens, New York, was like his reading lamp to me: nondescript. I put it in the same category as the four-poster bed and the dark mahogany armoire: old and German. It now hangs on the third floor of my house because I needed to fill a bare wall, a bare, cracked wall—and because my mother was moving to a smaller apartment in Manhattan. The village scene was surplus.

In fact, my mother said the tiny village may not be Benheim, as I had always thought; it may be any Schwarzwald scene, made up, anonymous. No matter. In the world framed in chipped gold leaf above my treadmill, I imagine my father herding his father's German cows, a piece of fresh-baked linzertorte wrapped in his pocket. I hear his stories about growing up here before Hitler (*Did I ever tell you how we had to walk five kilometers to high school in Dorn, one way? Rain or shine?*) as I fast walk daily, three miles per hour in fifty minutes, rain or shine. Beneath the motor's hum is the echo of a past I pushed aside in my busy American life, a past I now run to catch up with before everyone who knew that world is gone.

His village is tucked into a hillside of a narrow valley at the edge of the Schwarzwald forest southwest of Stuttgart. When my father was born in 1898, this tiny farming community of 1,200 was made up of Catholics and Jews (only three Protestant

families in those days). Facts like that used to wash over me, but now I can tell you much more: how, in 1645, the Order of the Knights of St. John allowed two Jews fleeing Poland to settle on their lands in the village of Benheim. And how the arrangement was this: if the Jews paid protection money and three pounds of sugar yearly—and brought a goose to the festival of St. Martin's Day—they could stay and trade cattle, leather, and small household goods, door to door.

The arrangement must have worked, because despite ups and downs with unreasonable rulers, two Jews became 10, 18, 50, 150, 250. . . . By the time my father was born, half the village was Jewish. They had been granted citizenship in the 1850s; and after that they were allowed to own homes, build a new synagogue, and start a Jewish school. "It was the best place for Jews!" my father used to say in Queens many years later. The Jews felt so comfortably German that half of Benheim's volunteers in World War I were Jewish, including my seventeen-year-old father and his older brother Sol. After the war ended in 1918, many left village life for the big city, and Jewish populations often dropped in half, but not in Benheim. Despite the wild inflation of the 1920s and rising anti-Semitism elsewhere in Germany, Benheim Jews continued to feel safe in their little village. A few young roughnecks joined the Nazi Party in 1933, but most people—Jews and Christians—felt that "the crazy house painter from Austria" would soon disappear, leaving the amiable balance of this village as it had been for generations.

No Allied bombs fell on Benheim during World War II, so you can still see my great-grandfather's house and the other fifty or so steeply pitched houses of the Lower Village. You can see the bell tower of the Catholic church rising above them, and the *Volksschule* where everyone went to school, and the two *Gasthäuser* where everyone drank beer (a third has become a home for political refugees from Turkey, Kurdistan, and Afghanistan). You can see the old stone tower of the Order of St. John (the palace has been torn down). And the synagogue (now the Protestant

Evangelical Church). And the switchback road still leading to the Upper Village with its medieval farmhouses of thatched roofs and tiny doorways, some four feet high. Many houses now have satellite dishes and new casement windows, but the view across the valley is still dense forest that the child in me calls Hansel and Gretel woods. The villagers call it the Schwarzwald, or Black Forest, because something in the air, long before air pollution, makes the giant green conifers look black at a distance.

You can still see the Jewish cemetery, which is up the dirt road that climbs a hill leading to a stone gate, deep in the woods. The old graves are still intact, 946 of them. And from there, you can see over the old red rooftops to new condominiums built where my father once herded cows in the days when Jews still lived in Benheim.

I knew none of this for most of my life. All I knew were some faded stories that I'd been allergic to as a kid in Queens, born in 1940, three years after my family arrived in New York's harbor. I'm an American, I'd mutter whenever my father started with his *In Benheim this, In Benheim that* . . . usually when he thought my sister and I didn't behave nicely. *In Benheim, everyone behaved!* Or when we fought over the best seat in the car. *In Benheim, we all got along!* To prove it, I never studied German, never looked through my parents' mildewed albums (now in my attic), and never wondered about the Schwarzwald watercolor with tilting houses and a bell tower. Or about the pastel, also in my house, of a tiny horse and wagon racing through the dense forests to somewhere.

Not my world, I kept thinking, until forty years later, in midlife, I saw an old Benheim Torah that was 1,800 miles from its Schwarzwald home. An old man in shorts and a kibbutz cap, who knew my father, was showing me around Oleh Zion,\* a vil-

\*Like the names Benheim and Dorn, this village name has been changed to honor requests for individual privacy.

lage in Israel founded by a group of Benheim Jews in 1937, the same year my family came to America. I had no tape recorder, took no notes (didn't know then that I was starting a quest), but I still hear the old man saying: "Ja, the Christians of Benheim rescued the Torah for us during Kristallnacht." He patted the case that holds the ancient scrolls and said proudly: "The Nazis had brought in a truckload of hoodlums from outside, from Sulz, to destroy the synagogue like they did everywhere in Germany that night. But these people, Nazi orders or no, decided to save what they could for the Jews. They buried things outside the gate of the Jewish cemetery, deep in the woods, and after all the craziness ended, they sent the Torah here to us. And we have it still!"

I was surprised. I never thought of ordinary Germans rescuing a Torah or anything else Jewish back then. My images were of black boots marching across the Hollywood movies I grew up watching at the Queens Midway Theater, ones full of Nazis I hated and feared. I looked at the old Torah, almost four feet in length, and wondered who grabbed it from the fire and why? And how many helped to carry it, a heavy thing, to safety? And did neighbors see them? And were they denounced? Echoes of my father's nostalgia came back. *In Benheim we all got along!* But he had meant a boyhood before Hitler, not during Nazi times.

The old man guided me to the Memorial Wall of names carved into stone beside the Torah. "They were *not* saved," he said softly. I looked at the list of eighty-seven Benheimers who died in concentration camps, almost one-third of the Jews of the village, their names lifted from shadow by an electric flame. Gideon, Weinberger, Strauss, Loew, Ettinger. . . . No one in my family, because my father had led our clan, thirty-five in all, out of Germany, like Moses. Or so the story goes, the one I had loved to hear. For if he was the hero, then I was the hero's daughter and would know how to be as brave and savvy as he was.

I bowed my head to honor the dead, but kept thinking about the Torah's rescue, the story I didn't expect. Was it true—or an old man's wishful memory? Did the Christians really do that? If so, Benheim was more interesting than I had thought, maybe

even special, an idea I felt obliged to resist. *Is this man even from Benheim?* I wished my father were still alive. I was ready for his stories now, but he had died in 1973, and his brothers and sister soon after. Only my mother was left to remember, and she came from the city, Stuttgart. “Another world!” she liked to tell me.

My eyes moved back to the Torah scrolls, partly unrolled to reveal a passage from the Five Books of Moses in tiny handwritten Hebrew. I thought of how these words had been chanted around the world, the same portion on the same day, for three thousand years. They looked secure between the two heavy wooden handles, even with a charred edge and one slash mark, the remnants of that Nazi night of burning synagogues.

“Too bad the villagers only saved a Torah!” I said.

“What else could they do?” said the old man, his blue eyes darkening. “Many Gentiles were decent, but we were all helpless. It was terrible times, terrible. You can’t imagine. . . .” His defense of “the Gentiles” surprised me, because we were not talking about life before Hitler when decency was easy and six million Jews hadn’t been killed. I expected more anger from him, less empathy. “*Na ja,*” he sighed, and we were silent.

We walked into Mediterranean sunlight, and I could hear the sea waves hitting the rocks on the shoreline. “Would you like to come to my house for some *gute schwäbische Maultaschen?*” my host asked, a twinkle in his eyes—as if he were already tasting this liver dumpling specialty transplanted from the Schwarzwald along with the forty or so families who rebuilt their lives beside this sea. My aunts in Queens had also made those liver dumplings, served in hot chicken broth. Delicious.

“My wife makes them the best! Her grandmother’s recipe!” His blue eyes danced with the comfort of old delicacies.

“Thanks, I’d love that,” I said, hungry for a dish I’d forgotten and also for the way bright eyes can keep changing like a watched flame. My father’s eyes also did that, flickering between nostalgia, loss, and anger, depending on the memory. And he too loved those dumplings. I could feel his yes in mine.