

## Part 1: THE ÉMIGRÉ STORY: my parents, Hans and Gerta

### The Mondrian Jumper

When at Art School in the mid 1970's creating a new life for myself after a divorce and after leaving my profession as a student counsellor, money was short but creativity was high. My closest art-school friend Helen made all her own clothes and taught me the rudiments of what we referred to as 'gonzo dressmaking' after Dr Gonzo, a character in Hunter S. Thompson's 1971 *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas*. The principle of the thing for us was rough and ready and fun, the only way I could attempt it. From an old bedspread of heavy woven cotton with broad stripes in deep orange, black and cream, Turkish style pants emerged, then a flared skirt and top from plush velour curtains, once a backdrop for portraiture in my father's photographic studio. I dyed it a rich burgundy colour. But my 'masterpiece' was the whacky winter jumper created by cutting differing sized squares and rectangles from old knitted and woollen cloth garments found in the op shop. Pieced together, I interspersed the varied and rich colours with strips of grey-green velvet accentuating the vertical and horizontal elements of the design. When finished it reminded me of a slightly muted Mondrian painting. I was in love with it.

### Perhaps a Parallel

My desk is strewn with printouts. Working on my parents' bitter-sweet émigré story is a juggling act much like the construction of the Mondrian jumper, this time about the sequencing of events. The text relies on memory, on my vast photographic archive, on old audio tapes now digitized, that my father Hans dictated, and on documents kept by him and his father before him. I am grateful that, like me, he was a great documenter, with a sense of history, valuing the past. He and my mother would have described this propensity as 'sentimental' but for me it is an invaluable blessing. I do however stumble, confronting significant gaps in my parents' stories. Did I not interrogate sufficiently, did I not listen attentively or has my memory failed me? Perhaps a mix of all these elements, and there was also much I was not able to ask. With the passing years, I also discover other slippages in what was left unsaid or unasked, a commonly expressed regret after the loss of loved ones.

Their story also relies on information I received from my father in 1991 pertaining to my maternal grandparents and the Holocaust. It had come to him in a large brown envelope from my aunt in the USA. Evidently, after the end of the Second World War, her husband Erich, my mother's brother, began to seek information regarding the demise of my grandparents, Max and Lola. The envelope contained a few documents, letters written by my grandmother and a short, horrifying note from my aunt specifying that my grandparents had been transported to Minsk, then capital of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, (today's Belarus), where they were put to death. My aunt included the name of an organization in Vienna through which I presumably could confirm the information she had given me. I did not pursue this at the time, the information she had provided being too disturbing to prompt further investigation on my part. However, what I had received became the catalyst for an extended personal and creative journey in which I honoured my mother and my grandparents through two significant bodies of artwork over a three-year period. [see ART/ OTHER PROJECTS/Out of the Shadows \(i\) & \(ii\) with considerable accompanying written material, and SELECT EXHIBITIONS/ War Works, and The Personal & the Political.](#)

Now, some thirty years later, I seek to further explore my family story, this time through the written word.

### Vienna: the city of my parents' birth

Vienna, situated on the Danube River in the eastern part of Austria, is a small landlocked country in East Central Europe that borders the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lichtenstein, Slovakia, Slovenia and Switzerland. Vienna developed from early Celtic and Roman settlements into a Medieval and Baroque city, the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The historic centre includes the glorious Gothic cathedral, *Stephansdom* (St Stephens), Baroque castles, monuments, parks and gardens as well as the late-19th-century Ringstrasse (ring road). Museums and other grand buildings, often further enhanced by the surrounding deep green sculptural topiary, line the elegant road.

Its plethora of musical giants - from the classicists Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, through the transition to Romanticism with Schubert and Strauss and onto modernism - consolidated Vienna's reputation as the 'musical capital' of Europe. And then there was the 'café culture', where for generations writers, artists, musicians, journalists and other intellectuals, predominantly Jewish, met. Vienna is now a UNESCO world heritage city.

It was into this culture that my parents were born, my father Hans in 1905 and my mother Gerta in 1908. From their youth through to young adulthood, before and after they became a couple, they partook of much of what the city and its surrounds had to offer. They visited the great art museums, were regular attendees of concerts and the opera, all the highest calibre. My mother described how she and her brother Erich, both great opera-lovers, took the affordable standing room tickets, an endurance test for most, remaining on their feet for three hours or more. They enjoyed hiking in the easily accessible mountains and indeed their love of mountains stayed with them throughout their lives.

### Growing up in Vienna

My mother and her younger brother Erich grew up in a modest, left-leaning, music-loving middle-class family living in a four-storey apartment block with their parents, Max (Meschel) and Lola (Karoline) Schweiger. This was the era of horse-drawn trams, dusty streets from the stone chips created by horses' hooves on cobblestones, and the introduction of the telephone. Non-observant Jews, they nonetheless had strong cultural and emotional ties to their Jewish heritage and my mother, and her brother belonged to a left-wing Jewish youth group. My grandmother Lola was a dressmaker by trade, my grandfather Max ran a small chocolate and confectionary-making business. The family took hikes in the nearby hills and mountains and enjoyed regular contact with the extended family. Life was happy until the onset of WW1.

My father and his sister Grete, eight years his senior, grew up in a more affluent Jewish family. His father Fritz (Friedrich) with whom my father was extremely close, held positions as director of several major government-owned banks, and in one, was the director of stockbroking. He was an extremely cultured and musical man who played the violin, wrote poetry and was also something of a collector of art and object d'art. As with my mother's family, they were non-observant Jews, however they were less invested in their Jewish identity and lacked the socialist leanings of my mother's family. Despite changing apartments every few years to accommodate grandparents and an uncle at different times, Fritz's position eventually afforded them an elegant upper middle-class lifestyle, at its peak, a beautifully furnished villa in Gregor Mendelstrasse with a large garden in the leafy 18th district and a trip with my grandmother Rosa to the opening of the Tutankhamun tomb in Egypt in 1921. For two or three months every summer the family - minus Fritz who remained working in the city - rented a flat on the outskirts of Vienna, always with a garden. This was

interrupted by what my father described as 'a proper holiday' in the mountains or seaside of Italy or Yugoslavia when my grandfather Fritz joined them. There was also the much-loved nanny, Tulli, my father's true 'emotional mother', who came to the family when the children were very young and remained, loyal and lovingly until my grandfather Fritz's death in 1937. My father and his sister enjoyed a blessed childhood. Tulli remained a major figure in my father's life until her death in Vienna at the age of one-hundred and three!

#### 1914-1918: the Kaiser's War

My mother referred to WW1 as the Kaiser's (Emperor's) war. The sacrifices made through WW1 had a significant impact on my mother and her family. It was a tough time. Her father and all the men in the extended family were on the Russian front for the duration. During this time, an aunt with her two children and her elderly mother - my mother's grandmother - moved into their apartment, now crowded with seven people, challenging family dynamics. My mother, aged six at the outbreak of the war, told me how she resented the favouritism bestowed upon the two other grandchildren by her grandmother, and about how intensely she missed her father, *alle weg*, (all away) she said. She described the trips to the country made by her mother Lola in search of fresh food, how hunger and deprivation was a reality.

My father's experience of these years differed from my mother's. From audiotapes he made for me many years ago, I gained a rich picture of his earlier life including detailed memories from the period leading up to WW1. In 1914 on a typical family holiday with other family friends, his father Fritz received a phone call from a friend in Vienna telling of the murder of the Archduke of Sarajevo. He remembers the family having a long discussion about whether this indicated the likelihood of the outbreak of war and whether they should all buy a big sack of potatoes in case of possible food shortages. The family returned to Vienna the following day. A few weeks later the family were in Tyrol and my father recalls hearing gunfire on the Italian front. This time his father received a telegram saying: *Hageschlag, Ernte vernichtet* (hailstorm, harvest destroyed), a coded message announcing the declaration of war. They left for Vienna immediately, trains evidently packed with soldiers sent to the front; at one point his father had literally to crawl over people and climb out the window to obtain food for the family. In his position as the Director of Stockbroking in the bank, his presence was required to deal with war loans. Thus, he remained in Vienna throughout the war and the family suffered no hardships. My father continued his schooling, studied the viola and enjoyed amateur photography.

My mother's adored father returned safely from the war in 1918, physically and psychologically undamaged, and life improved. She was a bright student taking Greek and Latin at school, studying French privately and playing the piano.

#### The Rise of Antisemitism in Austria

As elsewhere in Europe, antisemitism with its long history, was thriving due to economic hardship after WW1 in which Jews had fought patriotically. Austrian Jews were well integrated in the society and constituted 4% of overall population of Austria, 10% of the population of Vienna. According to Jewish scholars at the time, 62% of all lawyers in Vienna were Jewish, 47% of physicians and nearly 29% of all University professors. Jewish people also played a significant role in Austria's economic, intellectual, and cultural life including luminaries such as artists Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt, composers Gustav Mahler and Arnold Schönberg, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, and neurologist and father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, amongst many others. But they too faced severe persecution with the rise of National Socialism (Nazism) through the 1930's.

My father's ambition as a young man in the mid 1920's after further education at a technical institute, was to study architecture. But did not eventuate as the family circumstances had changed. Due to escalating antisemitism, Fritz lost his position as bank director and my father wanted to contribute to the family income.

Meanwhile, having studied classical Greek and Latin at school, my mother, a gifted linguist, then gained a degree in German Language and Literature from the University of Vienna. She completed a doctorate degree in the early 1930's, writing a thesis on the German Romantic poet Eduard Mörike.

My mother, Gerta spoke little of her traumatising experiences as antisemitism worsened but recalled an incident at university. Many male students began to appear wearing brown shirts, the identifying uniform of the *Sturmabteilung* or SA, originally a paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party. The Brownshirts' primary purpose was to provide protection for Nazi rallies and assemblies which were on the increase, to disrupt meetings of opposing parties and to intimidate Romany people, trade unionists and especially Jews. *A friend and I heard the clamour of footfall outside the room we were in. We opened the door to see a Jewish boy running along the corridor with blood streaming down his face. He was pursued by a group of male students wearing the Brownshirt uniform. We were able to pull him into the room to safety and quickly close the door.* I can almost see her shiver as she recalls the event.

Sometime after finishing university my mother met my father at a tea dance and thus began their prolonged courtship. In 1933, she went to Paris for eighteen months to further improve her French, working as an au pair. This was also the year that Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany.

In her copious letters to my father, she writes about the magnificence of Paris, and seems somehow pleased to be out of Austria. She explains the initial difficulty in following fast-spoken French but how her language skills improve steadily. She observes a lack of political and intellectual discussion in the family where she lives, so different to what she is accustomed to. She spends much time talking with 'Madame' and gets on well with the family who take interesting holidays on which she accompanies them, and she is fond of the two little children in her care. Meanwhile, her French becomes polished - *on my return I spoke perfect French*- but the political situation in Austria continues to deteriorate.

#### Last Years in Vienna

Between 1930-1933 my father was employed at the Vacuum Oil Company in the advertising department, also acting as an occasional photographer to document car racing and automobile club events.

He, as his father before him, had from childhood onwards enjoyed taking photographs, a forerunner of what was to come. As support for antisemitism and the National Socialists continued to grow, it was deemed 'inappropriate' for Jews to occupy a 'visible' position and in 1933, around the time his mother died, he was transferred to the sales department where he worked as a correspondent, a job he said he disliked. Against this background and after the death of his father Fritz (Friedrich), my parents finally married in December 1937, but life became increasingly difficult.

Quoting from Hans' dictated notes about the *Anschluss*, he says: *From one day to the next some work colleagues with whom I had had friendly relations appeared wearing Brownshirts and no longer spoke to me. There were many active Nazis in the company. On the news one night in March, 1938, we heard that Hitler had annexed Austria. Within weeks my job, like those of*

*all the other Jewish workers, was terminated. I was lucky that I received inside information via a friend, advising me to request my cash termination payment within the next two or three days as 'something was brewing.'* Three days later the laws changed, and the cash termination payment was no longer an option; the money now had to be deposited into a bank account. But bank accounts were closed. I don't know whether the others even received their payments, he adds. Jews were dispossessed of their property, synagogues and Jewish businesses were burned, damaged or looted; Jews were prohibited from working, banned from the universities, publicly humiliated, beaten or taken away. *The question of emigration was of course discussed with friends*, he says. Amongst his documents I find a typed list he had compiled of names and addresses of Jewish friends and colleagues to be forewarned in case of emergency. Aside from my father's name at top, I recognize two names, fellow refugees who ended up in Melbourne.

Through a second cousin Steve in America, I gain information about Steve's aunt Elsa, one of my mother's first cousins who had emigrated there in 1938. Reflecting on the period immediately before leaving Vienna Elsa says: *From the very beginning they would pull anyone off the streets who looked Jewish, and these people would just disappear. We used to make up stories in case we were arrested and asked what we were discussing. It was a very repressive and frightening atmosphere.*

### The Writing on the Wall

In Germany from 1933 onwards, the National Socialist government enacted hundreds of increasingly restrictive and discriminatory laws and decrees which ultimately denied Jews their basic citizenship rights and banned them from all aspects of public life. In Austria this was slower and took full effect only after the *Anschluss* of March 12, 1938, when German troops, with the enthusiastic support of most of the population, marched into Austria to annex the German-speaking nation as part of the Third Reich, henceforth referred to as Germany. Nazi leadership quickly implemented antisemitic laws against the 192,000 Austrian Jews. Universities lost over 40% of their students and professors in a matter of hours as Jews were banned. Many people, my parents included, lost property, their means of livelihood and had their bank accounts closed. The noose was tightening and my parents saw that they needed to get out of Europe though never could they have imagined the entirety and horror of what was to unfold.

There were few options of where to flee to, but immediately after the *Anschluss* several hundred were able to leave for the USA, Palestine and Shanghai.

In the ensuing period tens of thousands of Austrian Jews lined up at the US consulate in Vienna to apply for immigration visas to the United States. The numbers were huge and quotas restricted. However, with the help of the major international Jewish welfare organizations, the community and the Palestine Office were able to assist in the emigration of thousands, many to Palestine.

England, under pressure, took Jews by the thousands in the earlier period, my uncle Erich and his wife amongst them before they were able to later enter America. The importance of this assistance grew with the straitened circumstances of Austrian Jewry; as against 25% of the emigrants who needed financial assistance in May and July 1938, 70% needed assistance in July and August 1939. Between July and September 1938 emigration reached a monthly average of 8,600.

My parents begin setting in motion the necessary steps to try to leave. My father prioritises Australia over the USA (the reverse being the case with all my mother's cousins and her brother) as he feels it

is more aligned to his way of thinking - less competitive, less money-driven, more easy-going than the USA. If they have options, it is to Australia that they want to escape.

Although representations were made to accept Jewish refugees in Australia as early as 1933, the government did not yet have a proper refugee policy and articulated a reluctance to take many. It was stated rather famously: 'Australia does not have a racial problem and is not desirous of importing one'. Being pervasive, this attitude affected the willingness of most countries to expand their immigration policies to admit Jewish refugees. Through the 1930's there was an unwritten practice in Australia that rejected one in ten applications from Jews. By 1938, however, people such as my parents were able to come here without a guarantor if they could produce £200 landing money. Additionally, it was necessary to demonstrate that the occupations of emigrants would not disadvantage Australian workers in need of jobs since the country was just emerging from the Great Depression.

### A Matter of Urgency

In November 1938, the dreadful events of *Kristallnacht* (Night of Broken Glass) took place, a state-sponsored spree of looting of thousands of Jewish businesses, synagogues and other Jewish property across Germany including the former Austria, organized by the Nazi SA (Stormtroopers) and assisted by civilians. Some 30,000 Jewish men were also rounded up and sent to concentration camps. In the aftermath of *Kristallnacht*, the Nazi regime ordered the Jewish community to pay a 1 billion Reichsmark 'atonement tax' and rapidly enacted many anti-Jewish laws and edicts. Leaving was a matter of urgency. Now unemployed and with bank accounts closed, accessing the £200 was extremely challenging for my father: *I decided to approach seven people, all living outside of Austria, in the hope that I would find four who might each lend me £50*. The strategy, though difficult, was ultimately successful. He commented that of the seven approached, it was the wealthier who refused, and one of those who lent them money had made considerable sacrifices to do so. There were a multitude of other hurdles to cross since many documents were needed to obtain a visa, often expensive and with expiration dates. I have almost no records but they were fortunate as this process became much more difficult again once the war began. Hans and Gerta were readying themselves to leave Vienna for safety in a new world.

### Preparing to Leave: the emotional toll

My parents' back-stories differ. My father's parents had died of natural causes a few years apart from one another in the 1930's in Vienna. His only sibling, Grete, had converted to Catholicism as a young woman, subsequently marrying a Catholic man, Robert. As the Bombach family were secular Jews this was not a major issue. However, the newlyweds evidently acted dishonourably towards my grandfather which negatively impacted my father's relationship with his sister since he was extremely close to his father.

In 1938 at the time of the *Anschluss*, the Nuremberg Laws, were immediately applied to Austria. They embodied many of the racial theories underpinning Nazi ideology, providing the legal framework for the systematic persecution of Jews. People with three or more Jewish grandparents were now defined as Jews even if they, their parents, or grandparents had converted to Christianity. Thus, it is extraordinary that his sister Grete remained in Vienna with complete immunity throughout what my parents called the 'Hitler years', afforded protection through her husband's military connections. Though in the military, my father was emphatic that Robert, for all his faults, was not a Nazi. Given my father's relationship to his sister, it was not difficult for him to part from her and their daughter, MarLouise, his only remaining family.

Until right now, months after beginning this writing, I have never understood how Grete was afforded this immunity bearing in mind that under the Nuremberg Laws conversion did not alter the definition of race. Jon thrusts into my hand an article by Christopher R. Browning in the March 2022 *New York Review of Books* entitled *When Did They Decide?* It discusses a book titled *Wannsee: The Road to the Final Solution*. In it I learn the following. In January 1942 at the Wannsee Conference, there was debate and disagreement around the issue of the fate of German half-Jews and German Jews in mixed marriages. Options included deportation or sterilization of half Jews and compulsory dissolution of mixed marriages. Hitler, however, was more cautious about complications that could ensue than were any of the conference participants and left the existing policies unchanged. Hitler saved my father's sister!

My mother's reaction to their impending departure was far more emotionally charged as she was leaving behind her beloved middle-aged parents, Max and Lola in their inner-city apartment at Obere Donaustrasse 45a, Wien 2, in the hope that visas to a place of safety would subsequently be secured for them. In addition to leaving her parents behind, my mother and father were dealing with the loss of home and homeland, a means of support, and their personal and cultural history. While their preferred future was in Australia, my mother's brother Erich, his wife Marta as well as several first cousins, chose America though not all were accepted there initially. Aside from Erich, who went first to England, two of the first cousins went to Bolivia later brought to New York by other family members.

Curiously, under the Nazi regime, émigrés were permitted to take their furniture with them. So, in August 1938 my father organises with Ullmann, Rink & Co. for furniture and the contents of their apartment in Himmelpfortgasse, *Wien 1*, an inner-city street of four and five-storey baroque and nineteenth century buildings just a few blocks from the *Donau* (Danube River) to be stored in a container at the wharf at Southampton for later forwarding.

#### The Departure, October 1938

From a piece I have just found written by an old boyfriend of mine, I learn that my parents departed Vienna by train to Rotterdam where they stayed with friends of the family for a couple of weeks before commencing their ship voyage. When considering their departure, aside from this recent find I again rely on information obtained largely from my father, and on intuition and imagination. This was a subject I understood to be too painful for my mother to talk about. However, in an amusing aside on a cold Melbourne day my mother once mentioned that they had not brought their heavy winter clothes from Europe, misled perhaps by the sunny, tropical images on the travel brochures

They receive an allowance of spending money for the ship voyage, an amount my father described as 'generous,' and with documents, passports and entry permits finally all in hand, they leave Vienna. The departure must have been a bewildering mix of trepidation and relief, but also a great wrench accompanied, I imagine, by immense anxiety and sadness especially for my mother who is leaving her parents and her entire and well-loved extended family. Even as I think about this now, one generation and more than eighty years removed from the event, her pain lives on in me.

#### Journey by Sea

I have only the barebones of this, but due to my father's prescience, which my mother referred to as 'hoarding', he has retained, amongst so many documents, brochures from the shipping companies. Thus, I learn that they set sail from Rotterdam on October 22, 1938 on the *Indrapoera*

(Rotterdam Lloyd Line) en route to Singapore via Southampton, Lisbon, Marseille, Tangiers, Port Said, Suez Canal, Aden and Colombo.

From Singapore they travel on the *T.S.S Marella* (Burns, Philp Line) to Batavia (Djakarta), Samarang and Surabaya in Java, Bali, Brisbane and finally disembark in Sydney. I know only one story of the shipboard experience, again told by my father. By agreement with the ship's purser, they were able to save the allocated 'generous' spending allowance thereby enabling my father to immediately repay the most urgent debt - the £50 borrowed from the person to whom it had been the greatest sacrifice.

#### The Arrival, December, 1938

Having fled Nazi Europe, they arrive in Australia on December 22, grateful for its refuge, determined to build a new life. Their first sight of Australia occurs as they approach Darwin. My mother looks over the railing to the sea below, horrified at the sight of sharks circling, fierce-looking predators unlike anything she has experienced. The sea voyage ends in Sydney where the immigration officer has difficulty pronouncing their surname, Bombach, and urges them to 'anglicise' it. From Sydney they board a train bound for Melbourne, their ultimate destination. Circling sharks not enough of a shock, the aftermath of the January 1939 Black Friday bushfire in Victoria now confronts them. My mother speaks of her distress and disbelief as they passed through a blackened wasteland strewn with dead kangaroos. She wonders where on earth she has come to.

She does not yet know that more than seventy people lost their lives and over seven-hundred homes destroyed. She does not know what is yet to unfold in Europe, including the fate of her parents whom she will never see again. They are two of the 65,000 Austrian Jews amongst the total of six-million European Jews who die in the Holocaust at the hands of the Nazis. A further five-million non-Jews are victims of the same horror - Romany, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, Slavs (Poles, Russians), and physically and mentally disabled people.

Hans and Gerta have managed to escape the ever-worsening situation in Vienna, but these first impressions are a far cry from the poster images of Australia depicting blue skies and sunshine, pineapple fields, beaches, yellow wattle and healthy, bounding kangaroos! Nor does she yet understand the regenerative power of the bush. I find a letter my mother wrote to my father in 1983 while visiting her brother in the USA. As an aside she says: *it is always a great wonder/miracle to me how nature recovers here in Australia*. In another telling anecdote my father describes their arrival in Melbourne. By prior arrangement they are met at the train station by their host, a man who is assisting refugees. They are dressed appropriately for the occasion in their fine European clothes. It is a Sunday, and they are astounded to find their well-to-do host wearing his gardening clothes! Such informality is unknown to them, another experience of culture shock.

#### Early Days, Melbourne, 1939

Determination to forge a new and positive life for themselves in Australia required a range of qualities - courage, determination, careful money management, openness to people and new experiences. It is supported by kindness, generosity and a social conscience. They were taken briefly under the wing of an Australian Jewish organization who arranged interim accommodation. Within a few months they moved independently to Auburn Rd. Hawthorn, to rent a single-storey, two-bedroom maisonette with adjoining mirror-image flat in which the Andrew family lived - Frank a graphic artist, with communist party sympathies and his wife Kenney. My father spoke some English before arriving, my mother none but being an excellent linguist and highly motivated to learn and assimilate, she advanced rapidly.

## Enemy Aliens

The Australian government initially defined 'enemy aliens' as 'foreign nationals of countries at war with Australia.' They deemed refugees fleeing Nazism as such regardless of their Jewish identity, in part fearing the possibility of a fifth column, German or Austrian spies posing as Jews. The population in Australia numbered seven million, the vast majority Anglo-Celtic in origin. On a less official level it is noteworthy that few Australians had travelled overseas, and those that did, mostly visited 'Home', the British Isles and Ireland. Relatively isolated and not generally very highly educated, most Australians were unaccustomed to foreigners with their unfamiliar languages and traditions. It is thus not surprising that an influx of 'aliens' would cause anxiety. They were viewed with suspicion though some Australians protested at the unfairness of this. The government designation aside, my parents never spoke of a lack of acceptance on a personal level, and my father often commented on how he appreciated the easy-going and helpful nature Australians possessed. As an 'enemy alien' the authorities required my father to report to the police each month. They were permitted to travel only within a fifteen-mile radius of the GPO, but he was impressed by how 'friendly and casual' the police were. As 'enemy aliens' they weren't permitted a radio or telephone, but the broad-minded, sophisticated Andrews were warm and sympathetic neighbours and made both freely available to Hans and Gerta and became close and enduring friends.

### Part 2: THE ÉMIGRÉ STORY: my grandparents, Max and Lola, waiting

Meanwhile, the concern for my mother's parents and how to bring them to safety is ongoing. In 1938 Erich makes enquiries to the American Consulate in Vienna (now part of Germany), about registering for visa applications for his parents Max and Lola. The United States had no refugee policy, and American immigration laws were neither revised nor adjusted between 1933 and 1941. From 1938 onwards, American embassies and consulates were quickly overrun with huge numbers of visa applications from European Jews like Max and Lola, at least 250,000 Austrian/German applications, nine years' worth of demand in 1939.

The process of trying to get to a place of safety was long and arduous. Potential immigrants were subject to the emigration quota designated for their country of birth rather than their country of citizenship. Both Max and Lola had been born in Lvov, east Galicia (now Lvov, Ukraine but then part of Poland). A document dated October 1938 shows them placed on the Polish waitlist but the quota for Poland was only a few thousand which meant that they would be on a waiting list for several years. They finally managed to secure a guarantee of financial security – a so-called affidavit of support – and a visa for the USA for their children.

To leave Vienna, they still had to gather all the necessary documents needed to obtain a visa, which included identity paperwork, police certificates, exit and transit permissions to a port of departure from Europe and a financial affidavit and more. Many of these papers - including the visa itself - had expiration dates. Everything needed to come together at the same time.

Then there was the ship ticket, not only extremely costly but also, after the outbreak of the war, in short supply as many passenger lines stopped operating entirely or at least reduced operations. I presume that it was becoming apparent to Erich in America and my parents in Australia, that an American visa would not be forthcoming for their parents. We know that from 1933 to 1941, 110,000 Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied territories obtained visas to the United States, and in total America admitted an estimated 180,000-220,000 refugees, more than any other country. Concurrently with Erich's efforts, my parents were doing what they could to try to secure a place for Max and Lola in Australia. In September 1939 they received Landing Permits for them, the

very month Australia went to war (presumably making the permits impossible to use), but my information stops there.

### The Letters

In 1990 I unexpectedly gained possession of fifteen letters, a few documents and a note from my aunt- written by my grandmother Lola to Erich and his wife Martha in America between March and November, 1941. Apparently, immediately after the war ended Erich had sought information about Max and Lola through the International Red Cross and the Jewish Joint Organization. The Germans had kept meticulous records but the post-war processing of such a vast quantity of documents was alphabetical. As the family name commenced with the letter 'S', it took almost fifty years by which time Erich had died. It was his wife, my aunt Martha who forwarded the material to my parents which in turn came to me. But it was some years before I began trying to translate the letters. In translating I have tried to retain some of the 'flavour' of my grandmother's expression and language rather than transcribing into formal English. The translation proceeded in slow stages over thirty years, and through this process my grandmother has become increasingly recognizable to me. And in her I see so much of my mother.

On several occasions in her letters Lola asks why she receives no letters from my mother. This is difficult for me to hear, perplexing and disturbing. We are dipping into inter-generational trauma, about which more later. I have no record or knowledge of any direct correspondence between my parents in Australia and Max and Lola in Vienna. It proves difficult to gain information about the mail system during the war years. There was clearly no problem sending and receiving mail between America and Austria/Germany in 1941 when the letters were written, as America had not yet entered the war. This year also signifies the point after which it became compulsory for Jews to identify themselves by wearing the yellow Star of David.

Australia, however, was already at war which likely accounted for the absence of mail. Online research throws only a little light on my understanding until I come across a comment stating that postal communication was indeed difficult between Australia and Germany 'restricted to thirty words at a time via the Red Cross.' I also learn that from September 1940 onwards, many European ports closed. In another article I read of someone in 1943 who 'managed to send a food parcel with the help of a Jewish humanitarian agency from Portugal.' There were apparently many accounts of the desperation and powerlessness as people lost communication with their loved ones. Lola frequently comments on the slowness of the mail, not helped by frequent moves Erich and his wife made, both in England where they first stayed supported by a Quaker family, and then in the early years in America. Censorship, which was routine, further slowed the mail and fewer ships were able to traverse the oceans. In any case, for my grandparents Erich was the link.

March 1941: Lola writes: *We telegraphed through Cook 3 weeks ago to obtain the shipping timetables, to this day no success, only your Telegram..... we are almost convinced that you are managing to organize a booking, it is very urgent. It hurts me so much that you are worried about us right now, when you have so much to do with setting up your business and have big expenses and need so much money.*

April 1941: *the postal service works so badly. Hopefully you will receive the letters from us. You always write about a sense of relief anticipating our departure, but there is no trace of it. It's just always difficulties. You can't find out anything, neither whether all papers are in order, nor whether the registration number will be ready soon. You fall into darkness and become old and grey from uncertainty. In addition, no ship tickets are available. Everything*

*will be sold out by the end of 1941. You can imagine how we feel about courage. It is becoming more and more hopeless. You must have bled yourselves to death by raising the money, and we still have nothing to show for it. There's nothing you can do but wait.*

Despite the strain, the letters also contain an enormous amount of love and warmth, *Viel geliebte Kinder* (much loved children), innigst *gekusst* (most deeply kissed), *Alle Teuersten* (most treasured), *tausende Grüße und Küsse* (thousands of best wishes and kisses), and they always send their love to *Gerti und Hans* in Australia. The letters are caring and empathetic. Lola frequently asks about other family members and close friends already in USA; some, including first cousins already in America, await the arrival of their parents. Lola bemoans the fact that mail takes so long to arrive, often more than a month, sometimes two months. There is a great deal of talk about how they are missing Erich, his wife Martha and how they are not hearing from my mother in Australia. Amongst all this is news of other family members and friends still in Vienna and their attempts to secure passage to safety. My grandfather Max, who Lola affectionately refers to as Maxi, sometimes adds a few lines at the end of Lola's letters or she passes on words from him. In one letter he says: *I only have one wish, to be with you. A thousand Bussis (kisses) Papa.*

Mid May, 1941: There is talk of the problem of quota numbers, renewed annually, not yet available for them: *However, if you can show confirmation that a shipping company has promised you a ticket for a certain travel date, and the payment for the journey seems to be ensured, the relevant quota number will be available. At Thomas Cook, the Mosener has 3rd Class tickets for \$160 and \$100 to Lisbon on 15 September (over \$USD 3000 and \$2000 respectively in today's value). Try if you can get the cheapest tickets. We do not attach importance to luxury.* My grandfather writes: *I run round all day trying to organize everything but don't get anywhere. They are working on the German waiting list, so there is hope that if ships are available, we will make progress by the autumn.*

30 May 1941, Lola: *I think we're going to need a lot of luck to get away this year. This week we sent in a subpoena request form for the 2nd time. Will probably have as little success as the first time. You can't do anything but wait and think to yourself: Hast Du Glück und kriegst Du ihn, hast Du keines so wirst Du hin.* This rhyming expression roughly translates as: If you're lucky you'll succeed, if not you're done for.

June 1941, Lola: *How nice it would be if we could be there with you. Unfortunately, there is not much prospect of us leaving soon. In my letter of 30 May, I wrote in detail about our prospects. In July, new odds, new quota numbers will come, we will see if we are lucky to be included. There is no help from the K.G. (Kultus Gemeinde, a Jewish Community organization).*

Current research tells me that in July 1941 American consulates closed in Nazi-occupied territory, cutting off many applicants from the US diplomats issuing visas. Nonetheless, according to the letters time simply passes, until September when she mentions Cuba for the first time. Cuba was seen as an 'adjacent territory' to the USA. As such, refugees believed that they would get preferential treatment for a visa for the United States if they moved to Cuba where some visas were being issued. I also learn that after briefly closing applications, it recommenced but all was very costly and it was becoming increasingly difficult for people to receive exit permits from Germany; and if successful, they now had to leave from Spain or Portugal. Lola's much-loved aunt who she always referred to as *Tante Sophie* (Aunt Sophie) was a passenger on the *St Louis*, a first-hand

witness to this infamous affair. Thus, I digress briefly from Lola's letters to tell what is known of Tante Sophie and her attempt to reach Cuba.

#### Tante Sophie's Story: the *St Louis* Affair

This account is derived from several sources - written and spoken information from family in America, extensive reading and research, and a little speculation where no factual accounts exist. It elaborates upon the situation in Cuba.

On May 13, 1939, the German transatlantic liner *St. Louis* sailed from Hamburg, Germany, for Havana, Cuba. On the voyage were nine-hundred and thirty-seven passengers, amongst them my mother's aunt Sophie, born in 1878 in Bukovina, a division of the Habsburg Monarchy, part of the Austrian Empire which straddled the borders of today's Romania and Ukraine. Her family moved to Vienna sometime in the first decade of the twentieth century and she became an Austrian citizen. She spoke several languages, Yiddish, Polish, Ruthenian and German. As with my grandparents, not having been born in Austria it was impossible to get into America under the existing quota system.

Sophie's three daughters, (my mother's first cousins now safely in America), managed to purchase her a ticket on what turned out to be the ill-fated voyage of the *St. Louis*. Most of the passengers, predominantly German citizens, were Jews fleeing from the Third Reich; some were from eastern Europe, and a few were officially stateless. Nearly all the Jewish passengers had applied for U.S. visas and had planned to stay in Cuba only until they could enter the United States. But by the time the *St. Louis* sailed, there were signs that political conditions in Cuba might prevent the passengers from landing.

The owners of the ship, the Hamburg-America Line, knew even before it sailed that its passengers might have trouble disembarking in Cuba. But the passengers, who held landing certificates issued by the Cuban Director-General of Immigration Gonzales, did not know that eight days before it sailed, Cuban President Federico Laredo Bru had issued a decree invalidating all landing certificates. It transpired that Gonzales had sold the illegal certificates for \$150 amassing a personal fortune. Poverty, antisemitism and xenophobia paved the way for resistance to Jewish refugees. Entry to Cuba now required written authorization from Cuba's Secretaries of State and Labour and the posting of a \$500 bond. The US State Department in Washington, the American consulate in Havana, some Jewish organizations and refugee agencies, were all aware of the situation. The passengers were not. Cuba refused to allow the ship to land. It then attempted to land in Florida, sailing so close to Florida that they could see the lights of Miami. Passengers on the *St. Louis* cabled President Roosevelt asking for refuge, but no response was forthcoming. The State Department and the White House had already decided not to allow the refugees into the United States. A State Department telegram sent to a passenger stated that the passengers must: *await their turns on the waiting list and then qualify for and obtain immigration visas before they may be admissible into the United States.*

After almost a month at sea, all but around thirty passengers whose Cuban visas were valid, were sent back to Europe. After the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's negotiations, England, the Netherlands, France and Belgium agreed to accept the *St Louis* refugees. The ship returned to Europe, docking first at the Port of Antwerp (Belgium) on June 17, 1939, with the nine-hundred and eight passengers. Many, including Sophie survived but two hundred and fifty-four subsequently died in the Holocaust. Somehow Sophie made her way to France about which nothing is known.

The two years Sophie spent in France before finally reaching America remain an unknown quantity, but through other family members in America, research and hopefully intelligent guesswork, this is my best guess. We know she disembarked in Brussels, made her way to Marseilles and spent time in one of the several internment camps in the region, possibly Gurs, a grim place in the shadow of the Pyrenees. Gurs, presumably representative of all such camps, is described as primitive, overcrowded, with a constant shortage of water, food, and clothing. During 1940-41, eight-hundred detainees died of contagious diseases, including typhoid fever and dysentery.

Known for being an avid letter writer, on the boat Sophie wrote several letters describing how she and her fellow passengers were faring during this perilous and uncertain voyage. Her daughter Elsa, one of my mother's most loved first cousins by now studying in Cleveland, translated the letters. As there was a good deal of interest in the plight of the refugees, with encouragement from friends Elsa sent them to the local newspapers. *The Cleveland Press* and *Cleveland Plain Dealer* published excerpts of Sophie's letters. Elsa then mailed the articles back to her mother after the ship returned to Europe.

Sophie managed to contact the American Consulate, probably in Marseilles. Although it was extremely difficult to get visas to come to America, there was a program the State Department had set up which granted visas to professionals, including writers. By showing that she had been published in some Cleveland newspapers, Sophie was able to qualify for a visa as a writer and thus was able to get there in the summer 1941.

Another noteworthy avenue of escape, though not Sophie's, was through the remarkable work of Hiram (Harry) Bingham Jr., an American Vice Consul stationed in Marseille from 1940 to 1941. In charge of administering visas, he defied the United States State Department's policies and issued hundreds of travel and immigration papers as the Germans and their French collaborators began to round up the Jews for deportation. Bingham, with the help of the equally remarkable Varian Fry, a journalist, gathered a small group of like-minded Americans, refugees with diplomatic or underworld connections, and those French citizens who were sympathetic to the refugees' plight. They arranged escapes from French internment camps, forged passports and orchestrated illegal border crossings, among other dangerous activities enabling approximately 2,500 anti-Nazi and Jewish refugees to flee Nazi-dominated Europe, to escape illegally across the Pyrenees into Spain. Though the details are unknown, Tante Sophie somehow got from Marseilles to the USA; obviously now with official papers she boarded a boat, almost certainly in Lisbon, and finally reached her three daughters in America.

I regret not having thought to talk with Sophie's daughter Elsa about her mother's experience. Through my adult years until her death at ninety, I forged a close connection with Elsa, my mother's beloved first cousin, a highly intelligent and accomplished woman. I have a sudden urge now and for the first time, to enter her name into Google and many citations appear. It momentarily takes my breath away - Elsa Leichter (Schweiger). Her specialty in social work was family therapy, which she practised for many years at the Jewish Family Service in New York as well as teaching and lecturing regularly in Germany into which she introduced family therapy. Now back to Lola's letters referencing Cuba, where my grandparents were so close to gaining refuge in 1941.

*September 1941, Lola: I ask you not to drive yourself mad regarding the possibility of Cuba. The matter seems to be very vague. Moreover, it would be madness to make big money sacrifices for a not entirely certain thing. Hopefully we will come to you one day, and not too long away. But please don't worry. You blame me for the brevity of my letters. Bubili (like Bubi, a term of endearment meaning 'little boy' from Bub/boy), what should I write? Our lives*

*are monotonous and, thank God, uneventful. You live stupidly like dear cattle. You get up, eat, go to sleep, get back into it etc. Our only distraction is once a week Gretl (my father's 'alienated' sister Grete who apparently was very good to them, visited weekly, brought food until it became too dangerous). She tells stories and is funny. So that you kill a few hours pleasantly.*

And a moment of relief when in the same letter she writes: *We do not lose heart and hope and wait. Now comes the highlight, Mausi (term of endearment for Max, literally 'little mouse' or 'sweetie') has volunteered for work. Has been working for almost 8 days. It is from the Wehrmacht (the armed forces of the Third Reich), very light work, first-class treatment. He doesn't know what he'll be paid yet. He is very happy to finally work and earn again after such a long time. The work is not strenuous, although it is an 11hr day with one hour break.*

And then desperation. She goes on to say: *I am already very desperate that there is no mail from you to this day. The last letter was dated 6.9. Why don't you write? Are you still reachable by post? My nerves are already completely broken. I can't stand it anymore. This week was again not an easy one for us. Claire and Otto have moved in with their brother Alfred. Since he has a very large apartment, Musi and Lola will probably also move in with him in a short time. I can't spare you the reproach that this shouldn't have been the case if you had done what Grete (one of the first cousins already in New York) did for her mother. It is puzzling why she succeeded and you did not.*

#### The Accusation

Uncharacteristically, desperation and hopelessness have gotten the better of her. She says things to Erich that she later regrets and which must have been terrible for him to hear: *I once wrote to you that you should not risk anything, but if the situation were reversed, I would not have adhered to that. Despite assurances that you will do everything, nothing, unfortunately, has happened. It feels as if nothing has been done. In the end, it makes no difference where you perish. Is Aunt Sofie already there? How courageous does such a family that has been separated for so long have to be? Is there mail from the children? (Gerta and Hans in Australia). What's their news? I have nothing else to write about us. We are very depressed and desperate.*

The letters are testament to the increasing anxiety, then desperation at the endless hoops they must pass through. She says in one letter (translated from German) that, *one needs the strength of a tree trunk to endure*. After it becomes clear that, despite my parents' having procured Landing Permits for them, Australia is not a possibility, my uncle Erich tries to procure Cuban visas for them.

#### An Apology

In late October 1941 she writes: *Since I had no mail for so long, I was terribly anxious about everything above and made unjustified accusations against you suggesting you did nothing regarding the Cuba business. Dear Bubi, I ask you please to excuse me. I am just asking you to do everything you can to allow us to enter Cuba, but only if it is financially possible for you. It is urgent because time is running out. You know that I am not an envious person, but all those who are with their children, I envy deeply... it hurts us so terribly that you have to make such sacrifices for us. Old parents are just a burden.*

November 1941: a month before America enters the war against Germany, a letter from Erich's lawyer indicates payments made in the hope of obtaining the visas. And on November 29, Erich receives a letter from my grandparents finally containing good news. Translated from German, Lola says, *yesterday the authorities wrote for us to come to Berlin to speed up the visa processing. We hope to have the visa in a few days. Hopefully we are lucky and can leave soon.* Later in the letter: *Unfortunately, you are not yet finished with the sacrifices made, because we need money for passage... When we get the communication from Berlin, Maxi will go immediately to K.G. (Kultusgemeinde, the Jewish Community organization) to finalize departure arrangements. We will telegraph you.*

Again, via the US Holocaust Museum and research about the Wannsee Conference, I learn that in the same month Germany banned emigration replacing it with 'evacuation to the East' which would eventually encompass eleven million Jews from all over Europe. 32,000 Jews were deported to concentration camps from Vienna alone and later that year Himmler was discussing the construction of gas chambers to achieve the total eradication of Jews from Europe, to leave Europe '*Judenrein*' (cleansed of Jews, a phrase used by the Nazis) to alleviate the psychological burden of executioners tasked with shooting them.

The above letter is the last time anyone heard from my maternal grandparents Max and Lola. I do not know at what point my mother gave up hope that her parents may have survived but certainly there came a time when she assumed that they were victims of the Holocaust, having met their terrible fate in Auschwitz; this was the script my mother gave me. She employed a phrase which summed up her bitterness and the irony of the situation. *They were good enough for the Kaiser*, she would say, referring to the fact that the Kaiser (Emperor Charles 1, the last ruler of the then Austro-Hungarian Empire), was happy to use Austrian Jews to fight defending the Empire through WW1 only for them now to be oppressed and then murdered by the Nazis.

#### The Heartbreaking Final Chapter

Old friends from Melbourne with whom I had had little contact for a considerable time, visited about four years ago. Gary spoke his trip to Vienna in 2015 during which he began to track down the fate of his aunt who had died in the Holocaust. This led him to a remarkable Austrian woman, Waltraud Barton, and the organization IM-MER which she established in 2010, and two years later to a placename unknown to me, Maly Trostinec, the site of his aunt's tragic death and, as he discovered, that of my grandparents also. He gave me contact details for IM-MER, but just as in 1990, I was not yet ready to take the next painful step. Only when I began writing this memoir piece did I know that I must pursue it, to establish what had transpired after Lola's final letter of November 1941. Several email communications with Waltraud Barton followed, and receipt of her book which provided details and prompted further research about Maly Trostinec. This is what I learnt

#### Max and Lola

Between May and October 1942 alone, ten transports were dispatched from Vienna to Minsk, the capital of Belarus, formerly known as Belorussia or White Russia, and today a suburb of Minsk. Each transport carried about 1,000 Austrian Jews who the Nazis murdered either in the Minsk ghetto or in the extermination camp and woods at nearby Maly Trostinec.

In November 1941, Max and Lola now aged sixty-two and sixty-one, were forcibly removed from their apartment and sent to 4/10 Glockengasse in inner city Leopoldsdorf, Vienna's 2<sup>nd</sup> district. Glockengasse was one of many streets consisting of crammed, 'collective accommodation' for Jews

expelled from their homes with no access to money, barely surviving. Two other women, Ernestine and Elizabeth Hahn, aged 28 and 41, were apparently placed in the same apartment.

Since 1849, the *Kultusgemeinde* have recorded births and deaths of Vienna's Jews. After 1938, the institution was forced to organize the emigration and deportation of Jews, the forced 'deregistration' to Minsk. The precise facts of their transport there were also fully documented.

On Wednesday May 27, 1942, with an hour's notice, all four from 4/10 Glockengasse together with hundreds more, were ordered to report to a 'collection point' for 'resettlement' in the German-occupied East. From there they were transported to Vienna's Aspang railway station in open trucks in plain sight of the Viennese population. They had been told to pack a suitcase and food provisions for the journey. They did not know their destination, the length of the journey, and thus how much food to bring. They boarded the 'special' train, the fourth of the ten transports, marked *23 Transport* going along the twisting route from Vienna to Minsk/Maly Trostinec. That day 981 men, women and children were deported eastwards.

A survivor report indicates that the transport, like all others used, was a passenger train with small compartments and seats for everyone, the doors to the corridor locked. Where the track gauge changed in the small Belarusian town of Volkovysk, passengers were forced from third-class cars into goods trains. It took five days to reach Minsk. With inadequate food and water, and once in the goods train barely enough space to breathe, some died before reaching their destination. On their arrival in Minsk on June 1, the train designation had changed to DA 204, DA signifying Jews from Germany, probably derived from *Deutsche Aussiedler* (German emigrants). Wagons then transported them to the Blagovshchina forest 12km away where they were shot into pits that had been dug in advance. An SS activity report stated: *On May 28/29 further pits were dug and on June 1 another transport of Jews arrived and were killed. There was one survivor.*

Blagovshchina forest where I now know my mother's beloved parents, my precious grandparents, met their heart-breaking end, ironically translates as 'place of wellbeing'.

### Maly Trostinec

Maly Trostinec as a killing site marked an important turning point in the Nazi genocide. Hitler intended his invasion of the Soviet Union to be a swift war of extinction. Not only was the Bolshevik enemy to be destroyed, but entire populations were also to be killed or starved to death to create *Lebensraum* (living space) for Germany. German colonizers would farm what would become the vast new breadbasket of his Thousand-Year Reich. By late 1941, Hitler directed these murderous plans more urgently toward the Jews. Trains would transport the masses of Jewish people in the conquered territories, together with the remaining Jews of Germany and Austria, to purpose-built killing factories. The Jews of Vienna were the first in the German Reich to be deported for 'resettlement' in the East.

The Maly Trostinec extermination site consisted of three sections. The first was the forced labour camp on the grounds of a former farm estate which initially held Soviet prisoners of war captured after Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. But it became a *Vernichtungslager*, or an extermination camp, on May 10, 1942, when the first transport arrived with Jews from Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Austria, and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The second section was the site of mass executions by firing squad in Blagovshchina forest. The third was a facility in Shashkovka forest, a site for incinerating bodies on a mass scale.

In autumn 1943 the Minsk ghetto was liquidated and the remaining four-thousand Jews shot in the *Blagovshchina* forest. In addition to the Jews were partisans, resistance fighters, Soviet soldiers and uninvolved Belarusian citizens, both Jewish and Christian, shot to incite fear in the local population. After their defeat at Smolensk in October 1943, the Nazis in a massive secret operation, ordered Russian prisoners brought from Minsk to exhume and burn the bodies of the Jewish victims to conceal their crimes from the approaching Red Army. The prisoners were then shot so that no witnesses remained. A road maintenance manager in 1943 reported: *For around two months, the stale smell of burning flesh was emitted from the forest and thick plumes of dark smoke could be seen rising into the air.... Every evening the sound of shots could be heard coming from the forest.*

The Red Army uncovered Maly Trostinec's existence when they retook Minsk in July 1944, just days after the last documented mass extermination of 6,500 forced labourers and prisoners from Minsk, shot in a barn which was then set alight. But the sheer number of killing sites in Belarus obscured the history of Maly Trostinec. The Soviet authorities sealed the archives since Stalin's secret police murdered vast numbers of Belarusians between 1938 and 1941. Some towns en route had disappeared, their names forgotten or changed. The place name Maly Trostinec itself disappeared from maps when the area became incorporated into greater Minsk. Only in the 1990s were the archives opened to historians.

Because the Germans destroyed most of the records, as well as the obliterating much of the physical evidence, the estimated death-toll of the Maly Trostinec complex has varied considerably but the probable number of victims is at least 206,500. After Auschwitz, Majdanek, Treblinka and Belzec, Maly Trostinec had highest number of victims killed. Yet until a few years ago this was a site barely known in Austria as a place of annihilation

Waltraud Barton felt compelled, as she states, 'to anchor Maly Trostinec as a place of annihilation in Austria's collective memory' and has made it her task to preserve the memory of over 10,000 Austrians deported, then murdered in Maly Trostinec. She established the first and then ongoing Austrian memorial trips to Maly Trostinec. Barton invites participants to attach laminated yellow plaques she prepares bearing the names, together with birth and death dates of family members and loved ones on trees in the Blagovshchina Forest, now referred to as The Forest of Names. For the first time names replace numbers. She has also organized anniversary conferences to Minsk and Maly Trostinec and has written two books- *Maly Trostinec erinnern* (Remembering Maly Trostinec) and *Maly Trostinec-Das Totenbuch* (The Book of the Dead), where I found my grandparents' names, date of birth, last known address, date of arrival in Minsk and date and place of death.

### Dealing with the Aftermath

The Russians established a State Commission as early as November 2, 1942. Its purpose was to investigate war crimes, gather documents and debrief the local population. It produced a total of twenty-seven reports which formed the basis for the charges brought by the Soviet Union at the Nuremberg Trials in 1945/46. Few of the perpetrators of the genocide committed at the camp, were brought to justice after the war. Among them those who were, was Eduard Strauch who received a death sentence, though later commuted to life imprisonment. He died in Belgian prison in 1955. In 1968 the Court in Hamburg sentenced three low-ranking SS men to life imprisonment. They were overseers of the Jewish Sonderkommando 1005, recognized in 1943 as guilty of murder of the laborers forced to cover up traces of the crimes. Several people were also convicted during trials in West Germany and the USSR,

although they were not at Maly Trostenec, but for the crimes committed in the wider area of Minsk. Only in the late 1950's were Nazi crimes in Minsk dealt with by German and Austrian courts. Opening of Eastern European borders in the 1990's facilitated the beginning of Belarus research initiatives to establish names and biographies of the victims. Thirty-four grave-pits, each about fifty metres long and three to four metres deep camouflaged by fir-tree branches, were discovered in Blagovshchina Forest. Few of the perpetrators were brought to justice.

### Memorialization and Contention

For decades there was little to commemorate the camp of Maly Trostenec. The 1960's saw the construction of three monuments in Minsk itself, but they offered minimal information- only dates, number of victims, and inscriptions mentioning 'peaceful Soviet citizens, partisans and prisoners of war', and the 'Great Patriotic War'. The fact that most of the victims were Jews is omitted.

After the 1980's several memorial stones were set up, including the Blagovshchina forest. The first memorial for Maly Trostinec itself, public initiative in conjunction with Belarusian authorities commenced in 2002. The deportation of Jews from European countries and the Minsk ghetto is now included. In the civil initiative, *The Forest of Names* of Waltraud Barton, names for the first time replace numbers.

In 2010 at the initiative of the government in Minsk, work also began on the complete renewal of the former camp site including the Trostinec Memorial. The central element of the first stage of the new memorial complex inaugurated in 2015, is the *Gate of Memory* or *Gate of Remembrance* - two 15-meter-high stelae, representing figures behind barbed wire.

A second stage, a new complex on the site, opened in June 2018 in the Blagovshchina Forest. It includes *The Road of Death* and *The Forest of Names*. *The Road of Death* consists of symbolic transport carriages where names of the documented 23,000 Central European Jews were to be inscribed but since the names of the Belarusian citizens killed are unknown, the Belarusian authorities would not permit inclusion of any names. There have been other challenges also regarding aspects of the memorialization, inclusion and the nature of historicization. Jews are referred to only as civilians; neither the Holocaust, the Minsk ghetto nor deportations from Western Europe are mentioned. Both memorial sites still have features that are not yet complete. Nonetheless, the presidents of Belarus, Germany and Austria attended the inauguration ceremony.

The third part of the memorial, the Shashkovka tract, still awaits construction. An information centre is being considered to promote educational work and international cooperation so that it becomes a fully-fledged European place of memory.

### Part 3: THE ÉMIGRÉ STORY: starting anew

#### Reimagining a Working Life: 1939-1943

I find a photograph of my father taken in early 1939. It is his first job in Australia. He is working as an architectural draftsman at Buchan, Laird Architects in Geelong. Regrettably I have no knowledge of this part of my father's life but imagine he enjoyed this work which brought him close to his thwarted ambition to become an architect. I look up Buchan, Laird and find that this prestigious firm is alive and well. A few years after his brief time there, Buchan, Laird commissioned Wolfgang Sievers and Marc Strizic to document their buildings. Both Jewish refugees, these esteemed industrial/architectural photographers were well known by my father.

With his interest in photography, my father takes his first steps toward becoming a professional photographer in their new homeland. Believing it would be difficult to succeed in a large city due to competition and limited English, he feels a regional town would afford a better opportunity. In July 1939 he decides to set up as a street photographer in Mildura, almost 500 km north-west of Melbourne. Happily, he has charm on his side, a helpful quality when required to approach strangers in the street. Confronted by the provincialism of Melbourne at the time, Gerta is adamant that she will not move to a small regional town. She has secured a position teaching German at MLC, a private girl's school in an adjoining Melbourne suburb.

In January 1940 after six months in Mildura, Hans, now professionally known as Harry, returns to Melbourne and Gerta. Their commuting relationship is over. I find his first printed business card H.A. BONNEY PHOTOGRAPHER. Handwritten on the back is the date 12.5.40. Interpreting rediscovered scribbled notes, I confirm that he worked from home. After only eighteen months in Australia, he establishes the studio in the Dillon's Building at Camberwell Junction in July 1941. By December another business card announces: photo studio H.A. BONNEY. He is thirty-six years old. In September 1940 he writes to the Victorian Police requesting permission to purchase a small car to alleviate both time loss in contacting customers spread across many districts, and the difficulty of moving heavy photographic equipment. This time things move fast. I find a letter dated 20 September 1940 acknowledging receipt of full payment of £60 for an Austin 7 Roadster.

#### An Interruption, 1943-1944

His newly embarked-upon profession is interrupted when he is required to contribute to the war effort. In August 1943 he receives a direction to serve in Civil Aliens Corps. It is addressed to Hans Adolph Bombach even though in June 1939, following the immigration officer's 'advice', he had officially changed his name to Harry Allan Bonney, reinventing himself as a new Aussie.

All but business associates and customers, however, continue to call him Hans not Harry. Amused by this obvious error, I mention it to Jon who quips that 'the wheels of bureaucracy turn slowly and they haven't changed since!' Granted a one-year deferral, work was then assigned with an engineer who operated a small business producing machine parts for the war effort. The owner was kind man, sympathetic to his refugee status. In May 1944, now correctly addressed to Harry Alan Bonney, he is exempted altogether and returns to his photographic work.

#### Officially Australians

In the same month Hans and Gerta under the Commonwealth of Australia's Nationality Act 1920-1936, acquire British nationality and are granted a Certificate of Naturalization, formally renouncing '*allegiance to the Republic of Germany if and in so far as allegiance was imposed on him.*' This must be a moment of enormous significance for them, the next step in adjusting to a new life in a new land.