

# Work in Progress

On finally figuring out how to tell some turbulent family—and world—history.

BY MICHAEL H. LEVIN | In 1987 the *Gazette* published a piece I wrote called “The Roads to Grayevo.” It included excerpts from a long novel, “Swallow the Wind,” based on my wife Jean’s family history from 1900 through 1939, that I would wrestle with for 10 years before it died—that is, before it was killed by the agents and editors who kindly suggested I keep my day job.

After that the manuscript and background materials reposed in a filing cabinet for another two decades, until a chance conversation led us to revisit the work and make a startling discovery (to me, at least): the oral histories and memorabilia we’d accumulated were that cabinet’s beating heart: vivid, authentic, strong-voiced. Why not ditch fiction and let them tell the story direct?

Begin at a 1979 hotel dinner in Washington with Jean’s parents, Hirsch and Anna Bieler, fresh from their first trip to Leipzig, Germany since they fled the Third Reich in October 1936.

Hirsch Suwalski (later Bieler-Suwalski) was an “East Jew” from the Polish village of Grajewo (in English and Yiddish, “Grayevo”) on the Prussian border in the Tsar’s Pale of Settlement: a short, bald, fire-hydrant of a man who supported his family from the age of 14 by smuggling eggs, aspirin, and other commodities during the Great War, then smuggled himself past the border to become a petroleum entrepreneur in Weimar Germany, Palestine, and Philadelphia. Anna Burstein was a charismatic pianist from Kishinev, Romania, daughter of one of Russia’s first bassoonists, who traveled throughout that vast land to play under the baton of the leading composers and conductors of his day. Like her two older sisters, she was a performance graduate of Leipzig’s famed Mendelssohn Conservatory. They met in Leipzig in the 1920s and married there in 1931, living the good life with their toddler Tania till the tightening Nazi net changed such equations.

## Alumni Voices



Clockwise from top: *Judische Kulturbund* tickets allowing Anna and Hirsch to attend performances by Jewish artists (who could only perform before Jewish audiences); the unused tickets are from after they left Germany for Palestine. German Field Marshal Paul von Hindenberg reviewing his troops in Grayevo (then Grajewo) in Summer 1915. Anna and Hirsch after their marriage, with witnesses on either side of the couple, Leipzig, 1931.

Our dinner turned into time travel, extending for hours in the hotel lobby after the restaurant closed and through the next day at our Capitol Hill townhouse as their picaresque adventures poured out for the first time.

Sitting with them we walked through Grayevo circa 1900. We slogged the village’s mud lanes; slipped on ice by the public water fountain; heard Jews, Poles, and Russians bargain with snow and dust clouds, with each other and God. Then we were in Kishinev beneath flowering plum trees, watching Anna’s father leave for orchestra tours and her mother whack her fingers for mistakes practicing scales.

Suddenly we were in beautiful green Leipzig—un-Prussian German *kulturkapital*, home to Gutenberg, Schuberts, and the legendary conductor Artur

Nikisch—but hearing the boots of Hitler’s Brownshirts tramp outside as Anna’s 1933 labor-pangs began. We were transported to Mandate Palestine, where Hirsch became Shell Oil’s Middle East representative, manager of the first (still standing) gasoline emporium in Tel Aviv. In 1937-38, we shipped with them from Haifa and boarded the *Queen Mary* in Marseille en route to their fourth set of new lives, in America.

We knew at once that Hirsch and Anna’s tales of resilience, self-invention, and hair’s-breadth escapes must be preserved—and not only for us or our children. They posed existential questions with each border they jumped: *How did you get out? Why then? What made you leave when others stayed?* We started that weekend, recording them on then-state-of-the-art technology—cassette tape.



Over the next five years, we broadened our oral-history effort to include their surviving Central Europa friends, and to background research on Nicholas II's Russia, the Pale, the Prussian border, the doomed Weimar Republic, and beyond.

At the Library of Congress, we burrowed through pull-drawers for maps of 1905 Kishinev, 1914 Poland and Prussia, pre-revolutionary St. Petersburg, 1930s Leipzig—essential because street names changed like the weather. We traveled much further afield, for example to the Lenin State Library in Moscow, where we deflected Cold War suspicions to secure the memoirs of the last Tsarist commander of the great Forts of Osowiec, built to backstop Grayevo and the Imperium against invasion from the West. Books on the Eastern Front, fin-de-siècle Poland, the disastrous Versailles Treaty, the shaky Nazi rise to power and the cogs of its consolidation, crowded our shelves.

At the start I knew nothing of prewar Poland, Weimar Germany, the taste and rhythms of daily life in the Reich or British Palestine. As a political science major and the daughter of European exiles Jean was slightly better off, at least having read *Exodus* and *The Wall* plus required history texts. Yet over the years our ignorance diminished, aided by still more research, a 1982 week in Leipzig with my in-laws, an emotional journey to a largely unchanged Grayevo, flights to Leningrad and Tel Aviv. By sweat, site work, and imagination, slices of those worlds could be recovered; they were not wholly lost.

But as our knowledge deepened and manuscript pages accumulated, it became clear the book wasn't working. I'd never tried to write a novel before, and this one—covering dozens of characters, in five countries on three continents, over 40 years—was absurdly ambitious.

Other problems cut deeper. For instance, it proved unexpectedly difficult to write credible dialogue in these contexts: the characters' words mostly fell to earth, leaden or laughable.

Then I got stuck in the *shtetl*—to me the most foreign, exotic, and fascinating of those vanished worlds. The more I learned about Grayevo the more it infected the plot, dragging the narrative back-

wards with more village facts and incidents, as though the town's sucking mud covered my floor. My mother-in-law was not fascinated, however. *Pfui*, she remarked repeatedly before she died, age 94. "This *shtetl* stuff is boring. When will you write about the *music*? What happened with the *money*? What about our life in Leipzig and Tel Aviv?"

She sensed instinctively that novels are about relationships. And here was a huge hole: chemistry between the characters, between their thoughts, their hungers, their actions—this somehow went missing. I'd mislaid the first rule of storytelling: *show, don't tell*. The book was full—too full—of descriptive writing. It was all surface, dead on the page.

That was where things stood; and stood. Stray rejection letters arrived. The fat manuscript remained in its cabinet, five-inch floppy discs obsolete, occasionally rustling to remind me it was there. Everyone else stopped listening.

Until 2009—when I got into a Philadelphia reunion conversation with a former high-school classmate who had morphed into a Los Angeles Actors' Equity-person and once directed Charlton Heston. He was fascinated by part of the narrative and asked for a "treatment." Behold! I had one: a magazine piece that never saw print.

This spurred requests for sample chapters. Jean managed to scan the old typed pages into OCR format, allowing me to retrieve and revise them to salvage workable sections. Then my new collaborator asked to produce short plays from the new Grayevo chapters, beginning with a pre-War synagogue battle—fistfights, hurled benches—among traditionalists, radicals, and Zionist-Socialists. Not only that: he thought Hirsch's transcribed synagogue episode "too thin" and asked me to expand it. Not only that: he wanted the characters' *actual voices*.

The old cassettes couldn't be e-mailed. They were barely audible. Again my technology-gifted spouse swung into action, becoming an ION TAPE-to-PC keyboard expert, digitizing key tapes. For the first time since their deaths she began playing her parents' vanished voices. For two solid weeks we *listened* to them, spellbound, picking up innumerable details we'd missed, bursting into laughter or tears. In the light of our accu-

mulated knowledge the taped interviews were page-turners, with fully dimensional actors and robust story lines. They would tell themselves, I finally realized with a thud, if I could get out of the way.

For years we had fought an intra-family guerilla war over how to use this material, as fiction or as fact. I stubbornly clung to the former, insisting it conferred freedom to invent across gaps, lured by my lit-crit background towards the novel's cachet. That was a pigheaded illusion, I now can confess. The book—the real, natural book—was standing before me all along.

This tale has no end yet. Fistfuls of conversions from transcripts to plays still await my LA collaborator. There remain tapes to digitize and edit. Iron Curtain gaps in our Leningrad chapters, driven by fear of writing anything but chitchat after generations of war and terror, are not yet addressed. Nevertheless, I'm convinced this quixotic project spanning half our lives has not been in vain—that it has interest far beyond its initial purpose.

And the stories have kept coming. In the 1990s Jean helped bring her Leningrad cousins to the US, where they've thrived. Using her father's oxidized address book, sketchy family trees and genealogy databases like JewishGen and the vast Mormon microfiche files, between 2005 and 2010 she tracked down every relative on both her parents' sides. A family she thought tiny and mostly blanked-out in the Holocaust now numbers 250 names, births and marriages dating to 1840, with living cousins on five continents. In 2011 we collected still more stories at a first-ever world family reunion, convened in Florida but Skyped to Chile, Denmark, and elsewhere. These stories in turn have fueled poems, Leipzig presentations, and parts of the recent English translation of the *Grayevo Memorial Book* originally published (mostly in Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, and Aramaic) by the United Grayever Relief Committee.

As for the "book," after 35 years I know where I'm going. The path seems as straight now as the shining rails that ran West from Grayevo to worlds beyond. ♦

**Michael Levin C'64 is a lawyer, solar-energy developer, and writer based in Washington and Menemsha, Massachusetts. Nora Jean Levin CW'65 Gr'66 has been his partner in this adventure.**