

THE TRUE ADVENTURES
OF GIDON LEV (SAMPLE)



JULIE GRAY

with
GIDON LEV

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*For the children who were in or transported through Theresienstadt and
never came back.*

*For the children everywhere who suffer the terrible consequences of the
intolerance, hate, and war that grown-ups create.*

For the children.

INTRODUCTION

On the face of it, *The True Adventures of Gidon Lev* is the story of an elderly Holocaust survivor—a man who made it through horrifying events and lived to tell the tale. But Gidon (pronounced “Gid-awn”) did more than survive—he thrived. Gidon’s is the story of a little boy who never truly grew up, with a desperate need to belong and to build a family for himself. His story spans the beginnings of a fledgling country, a first marriage gone seriously wrong, a second marriage that lasted for over forty years and a late-in-life relationship with a writer and editor, thirty years his junior with whom his adventures continued, apace.



I moved from Los Angeles to Israel in 2012 on the heels of great grief and loss. Everybody thought I was crazy. But the heartfelt memoir I would write about my experiences would prove everybody wrong and heal all of my wounds. This was going to be my *A Year in Provence*, my *Under the Tuscan Sun*, my *Eat, Pray, Love*. I just had to wait for it all to make sense. But it didn’t exactly happen that way.

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It turns out that you can't really outrun grief and that regaining a sense of purpose can take time. In my case, a lot of time and a very special person named Gidon Lev.

When I was a kid, I saw a miniseries about the Holocaust on television. Starring Meryl Streep and James Woods, among others, the series aired in four parts. I was shaken to my core. Ovens? Gas chambers? Later in life, I learned much more about the Holocaust through films, books, and museum exhibits. By then, I had converted to Judaism. But the Holocaust—the lowest moment in human history, the absolute nadir of humankind—wasn't part of my family history, nor of anyone's that I knew, even tangentially.

When I came to Israel, I was aware that many Holocaust survivors lived here. Israelis are accustomed to their presence in the social fabric. Every year, on Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day), sirens blare out over the whole country in every city, village, and town. Cars pull over to the side of the road, and freeways come to a standstill. The whole country simply stops and stands, heads bowed for what seems like forever but is really only two minutes. My first encounter with this annual ritual of mourning left me with a deep sense of sadness and respect for the millions of victims of the Holocaust and the way that Israel, as a nation, chooses to mark the day each year.

I didn't know it at the time, but only two months before I arrived in Israel in 2012, Gidon Lev lost his wife of over forty-one years. Susan's death was a terrible blow for Gidon and the whole family. It was that great sorrow and a need to keep busy that allowed him the time and space to reflect for the first time in a long time through writing down the story of his life. It was through his writing that my life and Gidon's overlapped.

Gidon's life can be, in some ways, expressed through numbers, symbols, and dates. He was born in 1935, an only child. He was put on Transport M as number 885 and imprisoned in the Terezin (or Theresienstadt) Nazi concentration camp from the

ages of 6 to 10. He is one of 92 children estimated to have survived the camp. His father was sent to Auschwitz, where he was tattooed as prisoner B12156.

Gidon lost 26 family members in the Holocaust. He was liberated in 1945 and came to Israel in 1959. He was a soldier in the Six-Day War, responsible for an FN 5.56 caliber Belgian automatic rifle. He was a husband to two wives, father to six children, and grandfather to fourteen. Gidon was also a two-time survivor of cancer. As of 2020, he had lived for 85 years.

There are an estimated two hundred thousand Holocaust survivors left in the world today. Gidon is one of a rapidly disappearing generation. There may be fewer living eyewitnesses to the Nazi atrocities of World War II when you finish reading this book than when you began it. We must share their stories and we must make these stories matter.

The research, writing, and reading that I did while working with Gidon on this book were, naturally, distressing for me on many levels. We like to believe that the human race has progressed and improved—on the continuum of human history, seventy-five years ago is but a negligible blip. On the contrary, it saddens me that, for many, the Holocaust seems like it happened eons ago on a scratchy black-and-white newsreel. We have become alarmingly removed. “History,” as Mark Twain may or may not have actually said, “doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.”

The Holocaust has not defined Gidon’s life—he has not allowed it to—yet he found himself feeling responsible for conveying his experiences at the hands of the Nazis. Even so, he didn’t want that terrible experience to be the focal point of his life story. For me, this was sometimes tricky to navigate. I felt responsible as a curator of Gidon’s Holocaust testimony, as well as of his many other sometimes painful life experiences. I did not want to cause him or his family any more pain or grief than they had already endured.

As we worked on this book together, it became clear to me

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that Gidon's deepest feelings of anger and hurt were reserved for his mother. It took me some time to understand why. He didn't always express his emotions directly or dramatically on any topic, but I decided to err on the side of simply observing Gidon being Gidon in whatever way was natural to him. That seemed and seems the right decision to me. He didn't owe me or anyone else any kind of performance. I have seen people almost genuflect before Gidon when they find out he is a Holocaust survivor. He is suddenly a saint, a relic, or both. I think I did that at first, too, before I came to know him in all of his complex, flawed, sometimes hilarious, opinionated humanity.

Things began to get pretty dire in the world as Gidon and I worked on *The True Adventures* together. There were fires and hurricanes and political upheavals and migrants drowning in the sea. Then there was a global pandemic. The book became more than the story of one man; it became the tale of two people telling an important story in times that desperately needed perspective and hope.

There is history in *The True Adventures*—I think it's important to put things into context—and there is also poetry and laughter and singing. *The True Adventures of Gidon Lev* is about living through dark times and uncertainty and taking chances. It's about reinvention, resiliency, and joy. It's also about one of the most colorful characters you'll ever come across; there is absolutely nobody like Gidon Lev.

Gidon Lev did something extraordinarily courageous; he allowed his most deeply held narratives and beliefs to be challenged by viewing his life events with the benefit of time and a different perspective. All of us should be so brave.

I hope that Gidon's story allows you the grace and the courage to carry on—even when it's hard. “You don't get the life you want,” Gidon once said. “You get the life that you get.” A very simple principle is embedded in those words—gratitude.

CHAPTER 1
GIDON LEV



Gidon Lev needed an editor. He'd written a book, and he was, among other things, a Holocaust survivor—would I mind meeting him for a cup of coffee? He sounded very sweet on the phone with his slight, unidentifiable accent and impeccable English. I didn't have any experience editing life stories, but it was no skin off my teeth to keep an old man company for half an hour. It would be the nice thing to do. Plus, didn't I owe a Holocaust survivor at least a little of my time?

Gidon made a spectacular arrival with his phone dangling from a cord around his neck and a red clipboard stuffed with papers, notes, and receipts tucked neatly under one arm. I later learned he never goes anywhere without that clipboard. With his merry blue eyes, shock of white hair, and mischievous grin, Gidon Lev did not fit my image of a Holocaust survivor. But then, he was the only one I had ever met in person. He was energetic and cheerful—a force of nature. This was no lonely old man; this was a gregarious talker and inveterate charmer. Gidon ordered a cup of tea and launched into his story with gusto. I must admit I was a bit taken aback by how much he shared with me and how quickly.

Gidon told me about his experience in the Térézin

concentration camp then he kept right on talking. He told me that after he was liberated in 1945, he had been in a socialist Zionist youth group in Canada. (I had no idea what he was talking about.) Then, in 1959, he had come to Israel, where he became a devoted kibbutznik and taught folk dancing. He worked in a dairy. He had fought in the Israeli Army and had taken fire from Syrians; he lost his pants crossing the Jordan River, holding his rifle over his head. He had been stationed at an Israeli enclave on Mount Scopus in Jordanian-controlled East Jerusalem.

Then, mostly for the shock factor—I think—he added that two of his children had been kidnapped. *Okay*, I thought, *time's up. This guy is crazy.*

“Uh, how many children do you have?”

“Six.”

Gidon wasn't done yet. He told me how he searched for his two children in California where their mother had taken them. Along the way, he said he had gone to a nude beach, gotten poison oak, and worked on a farm. Then, he made a split-second decision in a California parking lot that changed the direction of many lives forever. He also had lived in Wales for a time with his second wife.

“But, how many wives did you have?”

“Just two.” Gidon grinned. “That was enough.”

This man was something else. I had heard stories about Holocaust survivors who were lonely, isolated, depressed, or sometimes heroic activists. Gidon was none of those things; he was more like a mischievous Peter Pan.

Gidon needed someone well-versed in Israeli history, not to mention Holocaust studies, and he needed someone with a whole lot more patience and time than I had. I wasn't qualified to take on such a project, I explained as nicely as I could, and reassured him that, with no doubt, there were any number of editors who would be a perfect fit. Just not me.

But I was troubled. Gidon's story was important; I knew

that. How could I walk away from a Holocaust survivor, an eyewitness to atrocity? Surely he would find a qualified editor out there somewhere, I told myself.

But Gidon was so friendly and outgoing, I thought it might be nice to be—and to have—a new friend. After all, if I was honest with myself, I was lonely. So I called Gidon up a couple of days later and asked if he wanted to meet for coffee again. Just to visit with each other, not to discuss his book, which I clearly could not, I emphasized, help him with.

“Sure. I just need to shave and put some shoes on!” he said. *Ob—now?* I hadn’t planned on that. Half an hour later, we sat across from each other at another café in the suburb of Tel Aviv where we both happened to live.

During our second visit, Gidon told me about his adventures working on dairies on various farms in Israel, and how he tested the milk for quality, and what type of cow was the best for milk, and how often the cows need to be milked. He told me about his six children, where they lived, and what they did. He wanted to know about me, too. Why was I living in Israel? How long had I lived here? How was my Hebrew? Did I want to go to his nearby home and see some of his artwork, family pictures, and books?

Gidon Lev, this father, son, grandfather, dairyman, husband, builder, dancer, doer, and—evidently—mischief-maker, was something else. I was quite taken by my new friend. He was a character, to say the least, and a welcome new presence in my life. We began to meet regularly for coffee and the strudel that he so loved. Soon, our coffee dates began to include going to the movies and shopping for groceries together. Cheerfully, Gidon started to show up and make repairs and improvements in my apartment. We went camping and traveling. We swam in the Mediterranean and subsequently nursed our jellyfish stings. We shopped, cooked, and ran errands together. Before long, we spent almost every day together.

In Israel, there is a saying: “For every lid there is a pot.” There is somebody for everybody, in other words. Though it was

a book project that I was not—and I repeat *not*—going to work on that initially brought Gidon and me together, it didn't take long for us to realize that we made great life partners, or Loving Life Buddies, as I came to call us.

If there's one trait that stood out the most about Gidon, it was his persistence. He was dead set on his book. It was a subject that he brought up at every opportunity.

In Gidon's office, there was an avalanche of mysteriously labeled, jumbled computer files of his writing, which he had paid a young man to upload to his computer for him. He'd printed it out in batches held together by paper clips. A blizzard of Post-its covered the mass. There was the yellow star he'd had to pin on his jacket that read, in large, ugly letters, *JUDE*. I had a physical reaction to it; I had never seen such a thing if it wasn't in a film or behind a glass case. Gidon showed me his transport papers and those of his mother. Gidon was on Transport M and he was number 885. I had never seen such a thing, either. It was sinister, written so neatly with such detail.

Along with his recollections of his time in Térézin, Gidon had written thousands of words and hundreds of painstakingly detailed pages about the regular stuff we all do in our lives: camping trips, birthday parties, changing jobs, and moving house. I tried to tell Gidon that these kinds of details wouldn't interest people outside of his family. He did not agree, and I could not persuade him.

Maybe, I thought, in my spare time, I could simply help Gidon get organized, proofread what he had written, and get the whole thing printed at a local copy shop. We'd put his photo on the cover, and Gidon would be happy. But Gidon wasn't crazy about that idea. Somehow, instinctively, he knew that there was much more to his story than his personal experiences. He realized that his memories were not, in themselves, a narrative. The historical and cultural background of his life had been

complicated. He needed someone to join him in his project. That person, he insisted, should be me. I didn't choose this project. It—and Gidon—chose me. That seemed to me a kind of cosmic beckoning, an invitation that I would have been foolish to ignore. I was in. If there were aspects of history or Israeli culture that I didn't know or understand, I would learn.

I made an appeal on a Facebook group for writers and journalists. I thought that perhaps by crowdsourcing the early organizational stages of this project, I could give this sprawling project some kind of shape. I was amazed by the number of responses I received. Dozens of people volunteered their help, advice, and encouragement. Some offered to go over the original writing and organize it by subject. Others offered to type handwritten pages. With the help of dozens of generous volunteers, a mountain of files and piles of paper had been corralled. A significant step forward had been taken.

I found a helpful tool—a roll of whiteboard paper that was sticky on one side. I unspooled it in the hallway, so Gidon could match dates up with events. Gradually, I noticed something beginning to emerge on that whiteboard, something in between the lines: Gidon hadn't ever *really* looked back at his most traumatic experiences on an *emotional* level. He was in a Nazi concentration camp at an age when he wasn't able to contextualize it in any way, then he immigrated to America where he didn't have the language to speak about it. Afterward, and for decades, nobody really talked about their Holocaust experiences at all; the postwar world was busy rebuilding and leaving the past behind. There were many other hurts, experiences, and traumas that Gidon had gone through as well. He'd had a painful relationship with his mother—who was by all accounts a very difficult person—a dramatic, tragic breakup with his first wife; two painful, life-threatening bouts of cancer; and then, to top it all off, the love of his life—the weave and the weft of his emotional well-being—Susan, passed away long before her time.

Finally, the penny dropped for me. Gidon had reached the stage in his life when he *needed* to look back and he *wanted* to be heard. And, importantly, he'd found a safe, supportive, and loving companion to do that alongside him.

Finally, after months of transcribing, typing, retyping and organizing, we simply started at the beginning:

“ **GIDON** “I was born in Karlsbad, or Karlovy Vary, in Czechoslovakia, in 1935. Originally, my name was not Gidon. I was born Peter Wolfgang Löw. Peter—not a Jewish name. Wolfgang—because my grandfather played the viola. I guess he liked Mozart. So he gave me the middle name. Löw was my family name.

The truth is, my grandfather owned a Stradivarius viola. When the war came, he gave it to someone for safekeeping. I still have the receipt. But my grandfather died in the Warsaw ghetto and the viola was never to be seen again.”

Taking a bird's eye historical view, I decided, was not just important but critical in understanding the times during which Gidon lived. Adolf Hitler was elected the führer of Germany in August 1934, about six months before he was born. When Gidon was just six months old, the Nuremberg Race Laws stripped German Jews of their rights, and an inexorable horror ground into motion.

In 1938, when Peterl, as his mother called him, was just three, Germany annexed the Sudetenland in the Munich Agreement. That was where Gidon's family lived: a part of Czechoslovakia that is just east of Germany. After Hitler's annexation, the Jewish population in the Sudeten fled eastward to Prague. Gidon's family packed up, too. Gidon's stern, diminutive mother, Doris, had been trained as a milliner, and his father, Ernst, owned a scrap-iron lot. Everything was left behind.

“ **GIDON** “I remember happy times and being with my mother, father, and grandparents celebrating my third birthday. The highlight was a beautiful red tricycle with black rubber handlebars. I was so overjoyed that I rode it until I collapsed in bed each night. However, slowly, things began to change, and I couldn’t make sense of it. After all, I was only three years old; I didn’t know about Hitler, Germany, or even what or who Jews were. When we fled to Prague, I had to leave my tricycle behind and it broke my heart.”

The family crowded into a small flat in Prague: Gidon, his mother and father, and his paternal grandparents, frightened and unsure about what would happen next. For three years, they lived in fear and dread along with thousands of others who had fled Hitler’s murderous regime hoping they would stay safe.

“ **GIDON** “Arriving in Prague in 1938 was a tremendous relief for my parents, at least at first. We rented an apartment not far from the center of the city. There, we waited for our household furniture and belongings to arrive, but they never did. I learned later that the mover we hired took everything.”

Three years later, in 1941, Gidon was transported with his mother and grandfather to the Terezin (Theresienstadt) concentration camp, just over 30 miles north of Prague. His father had been sent on a transport to the same camp two weeks earlier. Peter—Gidon—spent four years in the camp. In fact, of the estimated fifteen thousand children who were imprisoned in or transported through Terezin, only ninety-two are known to have survived. Gidon is one of those children.

Although Gidon and his mother survived, his father, great-

grandmother, three grandparents, aunts, great-aunts, uncles, great-uncles, and cousins all perished in Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Treblinka, and Majdanek and in the Izbica and Warsaw ghettos. What had been a large family spread across Czechoslovakia and Austria was reduced to two family members: Gidon and his mother, Doris.

“But we had to go to Prague, before you could really understand the rest,” Gidon added.

“Yes, yes, next chapter. Hold your horses,” I said. “That hasn’t happened yet.”

The book was in its early stages, and Gidon wanted to hear and comment on every word and page. That seemed fair enough to me. It was his life story, after all. But we would have to try to come up with a routine.

“Let’s make a deal,” I said. “Once a week, I’ll either read the new pages to you or print them out and you can read them. If there’s something you want to change or add, just tell me.”

“Every day.”

“Every week.”

I had by then learned that Gidon tended to be stubborn—but he was also right an annoying majority of the time, which meant I took him seriously. But I had to have some latitude, or the book Gidon wanted so badly would never get written. Finally, we agreed that we would go over every chapter together, weekly, and that Gidon’s notes and comments would focus on those matters of great importance—not just facts, dates, and the like, but his feelings. This would come to be a routine that we both enjoyed, but I was surprised, over and over, by the things that caught Gidon’s attention for comment or correction and those that did not. His comments (or lack of them) offered a valuable insight not just into Gidon but into the nature of memory itself.

CHAPTER 2
PRAHA



There are a lot of things I didn't think about before I met Gidon. For instance, in my mind's eye, there was Europe before World War II: tumultuous but sophisticated, cultured, and European—that ineffable, superior quality we Americans adore. Then there was Europe during World War II: a kind of hell with billowing black smoke and lines of tanks and concentration camps. Then there was Europe after World War II: cafés, fountains, and cathedrals of historic grandeur.

Why did I have such images of postwar Europe as a glamorous place to go when, in fact, Europe was devastated, in every respect, for years?

With the postwar rebuilding and innovation in Europe, optimism in America, and worldwide hope, a new era of consumerism and tourism was born. Hollywood films showed American audiences romantic images of Europeans sitting in cafés, riding Vespas, and smoking insouciantly. It was an image cultivated to encourage tourism and economic growth. An American could be forgiven for buying into this hopeful, glamorous vision.

The truth was that Europe had to be rebuilt, and several international organizations we take for granted now were formed

posthaste. The UN (United Nations), UNICEF (UN International Children's Emergency Fund), WHO (World Health Organization), and the World Bank were just a few. Indeed, under the U.S. Marshall Plan, the United States sent more than twelve billion dollars in foreign aid to Europe.

Another thing I hadn't noticed before was that World War II and the Holocaust were often understood differently in popular culture. For some, World War II occupied the foreground, with places and names such as Dunkirk and Normandy and Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, and General Patton. The war brought up visions of muddy battles, tanks, bombers, ruins, and rations.

The Holocaust was the horror happening in the background. It was different. It brought up images of corpses, ovens, barbed-wire fences, and ominous, chugging trains full of terrified, doomed Jews. Names such as Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, Adolf Eichmann, and Hermann Göring and places like Auschwitz and Treblinka came to mind.

How did it come to pass that one conflict, which exploded into thousands of conflicts and acts of brutality and war across Europe, Africa, and the Pacific, could be seen as separate narratives? Wasn't the Holocaust synonymous with World War II? And what was the Shoah, anyway?

I was not familiar with the word *Shoah* until I saw French director Claude Lanzmann's epic 1985 film by the same name. *Shoah*, a documentary of 556 minutes (nine hours and twenty-six minutes) is considered a masterpiece and was hailed widely by critics. Roger Ebert wrote of the film: "It is not a documentary, not journalism, not propaganda, not political. It is an act of witness".¹ I saw the film at UC Santa Barbara. It was shown in three-hour increments over a period of three days. I remember emerging from the dark theater into the bright California sunshine and feeling a sense of deep disconnect and sorrow. The sunshine and palm trees outside could not wash away the first-person testimonies and long shots of railroad tracks that had been projected on a screen inside.

Shoah is a Hebrew word that means *catastrophe*. Over time, many Jews have come to prefer this term to the word *holocaust*, which comes from the first Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, called the Septuagint, and dates back to the third century BCE. Scholars agree that *holocaust* means “wholly burnt” and refers to a burnt sacrificial offering.

The word *holocaust* was first used to describe the Hamidian (or, in modern terms, Armenian) Massacres perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks from 1894 to 1896. Although many believe that a word that implies an offering is unsuitable to describe the Jewish genocide, “the Holocaust” has become synonymous with the murder of six million Jews (and millions of others) at the hands of the Nazis.



Gidon felt it was important to show me the place of his birth, his flight, and his imprisonment. Of course, he was right. We made plans to go to the Czech Republic. We were to fly to Prague, stay for a few days, then travel to Karlovy Vary and, finally, Térézin.

Though Gidon had twice been back before, in 1989 and in 2008 with his family, this time his feelings were complicated. Maybe he intuited that he might never see these places again. Or perhaps he was nervous about whether the places he had described to me in such detail would be as he said they were.

The plane we boarded at Ben-Gurion International Airport held all the usual suspects: crying children, harried parents, and young travelers. There was also a group of about twenty yeshiva (orthodox religious) students from Brooklyn who had been studying in Israel.

“Oh, great,” Gidon muttered darkly as we took in the black-clad group of youths. Moments later, we discovered that our seatmate was one of the yeshiva boys. He and Gidon had a pleasant conversation about Prague and Gidon’s history. I was

relieved that the topic of Jewish religious observance did not come up.



There is a curious and often painful divide between secular and religious Jews in Israel. This is sometimes expressed with secular Jews feeling that the very religious (i.e., the ultra-orthodox) are backward, superstitious, and intolerant and with the ultra-orthodox viewing secular Jews as having abandoned what they see as the basic obligations of being a Jew.

Gidon's family was, like many Jews living in central and western Europe before the war, entirely secular and very much a part of the local culture. Gidon did not have a ritual circumcision, bar mitzvah, or any of the typical rites of passage for male Jews. In fact, he didn't realize he was Jewish until he was in a concentration camp. After the war, Gidon never considered a Jewish religious identity for a moment. For him, being a Jew meant building a country. Religion had nothing to do with it.

That said, and although the ultra-orthodox make up only about 12 percent of the population in Israel, many argue their political influence is outsized. A familiar source of friction within Israel, the argument for many comes down to who is a Jew or who is Jewish enough.



Prague (*Praha* in Czech) is one of the top tourist destinations in Europe—and for good reason. Gidon proudly showed me the towering spires and fairytale buildings which, he observed with some wonder, had been significantly renovated and beautified since the fall of the Soviet Union. This was the Prague that Gidon remembered and loved.

Like other European capitals, Prague has a long, windy history of kings, invasions, destruction, and rebuilding. It struck

me as a city where the cool kids live: artists, writers, and intellectuals. Prague is a city in which one could linger for weeks, going to museums, reading novels, and sitting in cafés, soaking up the atmosphere as the sun slips over the pointy buildings and creates deep shadows. There are plenty of shadows in Prague.

“ **GIDON** “Immediately after we came to Prague in 1938, restrictions on the Jews were announced. Jews, young and old, had to wear the yellow Star of David with *JUDE* written in black on it on the left side of their chest. Later I learned that these stars were available for a sum of money in every postal and government office and, adding insult to injury, we were required to buy them for ourselves; not wearing it was punishable by death. Soon after, Jews were forced to follow a curfew and to be home at 8 p.m. All bank accounts belonging to Jews were confiscated and became the property of the Third Reich. The same went for safety deposit boxes, no matter what they held. Jewelry, cameras, typewriters, and especially radios of any size were to be handed in to the authorities. Even public transportation was restricted for us, including where we were allowed to sit if we were lucky enough to get on a tramway at all. Every day it seemed there was a new ordinance.”

On our second day in Prague, Gidon and I made our way over the cobblestones and through the crowds to the Pinkas Synagogue in the old Jewish quarter. A synagogue dating back to the sixteenth century, today it is run by the Jewish Museum. Inside the synagogue/museum is a permanent exhibit of the names of the estimated seventy-eight thousand Czech Jews murdered during the Holocaust. The names are written according to village or region—regions with Hapsburg-y names

such as Moravia and Bohemia in the country then called Czechoslovakia. It took Gidon and me only a few minutes to find the names of his father and grandparents. Nearby, the yeshiva boys we'd seen on the plane were gathered in a circle and singing a traditional song of grief and mourning in Hebrew. Their voices rose above us and echoed.

I tried to photograph the family names inscribed on the wall, but I couldn't zoom in enough on the names that were relevant only to Gidon. There were just too many. Round and round the walls the names went.

Outside the Pinkas Synagogue is the old Jewish cemetery, which is one of the oldest Jewish cemeteries in Europe. Enclosed by walls and crammed into a relatively small, stony, mossy place, it radiates with a jagged and solemn atmosphere, packed with gravestones peppered with stones, which are the traditional Jewish expression of the permanence of memory at a gravesite, rather than flowers that wilt and fade.

There in the cemetery, Gidon and I came upon the yeshiva boys yet again. Our airplane seatmate recognized us, greeted Gidon warmly, then looked immediately over Gidon's head.

"You guys!" he called. "Come here, quick!" Gidon had told the young man a bit about his history on the plane. Only a moment later, Gidon was surrounded by the eager and awestruck faces of the boys.

"So where's your number?" one asked, gesturing to Gidon's arm. Gidon explained that it was only at Auschwitz where Nazis tattooed numbers on the arms of prisoners and that, furthermore, children sent to Auschwitz generally did not survive to show their numbers anyway.

A few other tourists, overhearing the conversation, listened in. Gidon loved the attention, but I saw his energy flagging. We bid our goodbyes, and Gidon stooped to pick up a branch that had fallen on the ground and used it as he walked away regally. The yeshiva boys and tourists stared after him.

As we made our way back to our hotel, we passed by the Old

New Synagogue, Europe's oldest operating synagogue, completed in 1270. Legend has it that, in the attic of the synagogue, there is a box containing the body of the Golem. The Golem is a figure from a centuries-old Jewish myth; it is a powerful, avenging creature made of mud, with superhuman strength and an inability to speak. If this sounds at all familiar, it is because the myth of the Golem was famously borrowed by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley as the tragic character of her novel *Frankenstein*, as well as dozens of other literary works, including *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* by Michael Chabon. The Golem has even been associated with the Gingerbread Man and a Slavic myth called "The Clay Boy."

The Golem in the attic has a purpose. It lies dormant until it is brought to life to protect the Jews from pogroms. A pogrom is a massacre that takes place when a violent mob enters a Jewish neighborhood or village and sets fire to and destroys everything and everyone in sight with guns, knives, and even bare hands. There is rape. There is murder. Pogroms were an unspeakably horrible and regular fact of life for Jews living in Europe for centuries. The Golem is a legend that arose from sheer desperation.

Legend says that if one wrote the Hebrew letters *aleph*, *mem*, and *tav* ("truth") on its forehead, the Golem would come to life and obey whoever commands it. Erase the *aleph* on the Golem's forehead and what remains is *mem* and *tav* ("death") and the Golem stops—until further notice.

It was interesting, I thought, that "truth" brings life and that "death" is only temporary.

Outside the Old New Synagogue, shops did a brisk business selling Golem cookies, keychains, magnets, and other Golem-shaped tchotchkes. Naturally, I wanted to buy something Golem-related, but Gidon was ready to go.

We dined at a café along the Vltava River overlooking the Charles Bridge, surrounded by tourists and souvenir shops. There, we had a view of the huge, many-spired Prague Castle,

which overlooks the Vltava River and all of Prague. The castle, the seat of power for the kings of Bohemia since the ninth century, once had an unwelcome guest. On March 15, 1939, Hitler spent the night there and, reportedly, looked out over Prague—his latest conquest—with pride. The previous day, Czech president Emil Hácha had suffered a heart attack when he was informed that if he did not agree to allow a complete Nazi takeover, Prague would be bombed.

Perusing the café menu, distracted by the horrible idea that Adolf Hitler himself had also been in Prague, I thought about a terrible fact: Before the war, approximately ninety-two thousand Jews lived in Prague. Today, there were about five thousand.²

I ordered a glass of absinthe even though I had heard that it's doubtful any absinthe ordered at a café in Prague—particularly a tourist café—was authentic. I was too tired and sad to care. It was jewel green and pretty. Gidon tasted it and made a face. He was right. It was awful.

The following day, Gidon was to show me the building that he and his family took shelter in for three years, from 1938 until 1941.

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CHAPTER 3
ITALSKA



“**GIDON** “There were five of us who lived in the small flat on Italska 7 Street. I shared a bedroom with my grandfather because my grandmother was very ill and needed her own room. I remember going to kindergarten, and I remember being sick quite often, with colds and sometimes a fever, too. When I stayed home from school, I would sit at a small table, sewing little garments for my doll while my mother worked on hats for her clients. My mother had gone to a millinery school when she was growing up, and this was her profession, and it helped us to survive since neither my father nor, even less so, my grandfather could find work because nobody would hire Jews. We lived close to a lovely playground, where my grandpa Alfred would take me from time to time. I remember the swings there, one in the shape of a canoe, which I particularly loved. One day, I came home from kindergarten to find my father terribly aggravated and angry with my mother. It was my mother’s regular practice to air out our bedding on the

windowsill every day, and, that day, one of the pillows had fallen down to the street. My father had run down the four floors of steps only to find an elderly lady who had picked up the fallen pillow. After my father thanked her profusely, he had come back upstairs with the pillow, and only then did it become clear to my mother why he was so upset. My family had hidden all of my parents' money inside that pillow.”

Italska Street is in what is now an up-and-coming neighborhood in Prague, with cafés, a yoga studio, and frozen yogurt shops. But the building at Italska 7, although not lacking in character, was not as well-kept as the neighboring buildings.

I took a picture of Gidon on the steps of the building, wearing his backpack, looking curiously like a child as he peered into the glass front doors. Inside, a Czech janitor was mopping the floor disinterestedly. He caught sight of us and opened the door, a cigarette dangling from his lip. I tried to explain that Gidon used to live in the building long ago, but the janitor only shrugged and continued working.

I wasn't sure how Gidon was feeling or how he was taking all of this. He seemed cheerful enough and was energized to be in Prague. But I didn't want to pry or to project my own feelings onto him. I just wanted to let him be and allow him to show me his past without expectation. Was there a way that Gidon was *supposed* to be feeling? It wasn't for me to judge. It seemed to me that Gidon had told his story so many times throughout his life that he had become accustomed to it.

I have seen him weep, overcome with joy or with sadness in unexpected moments—maybe because of a sad television commercial or an old song. I get it. Some things are too much to think about directly even when they are right in front of you.

“ **GIDON** “Public parks were only for ‘Aryans,’ and so were public playgrounds. My grandfather could no longer take me to the park, where my favorite canoe swing had once lifted me away from our dark reality. The German Gestapo entered the homes of Jews without the slightest warning or provocation. I was fearful of any knock on our door and would hide in the darkest corner of our apartment lest it be the feared intrusion of the Gestapo. If they did find something, they not only confiscated it, but the entire family also was taken away, never to be heard from again.”

Ignoring the sulky janitor, I took a picture of the stairs coming down to the lobby. Long ago, a six-year-old Gidon and his mother clunked down these very stairs with their suitcases and rucksacks on a cold autumn morning in 1941, obeying orders to report to the train station.

“ **GIDON** “A new announcement came that said all Jews would be resettled in Terezin, a village and army camp from the Great War, just 55 kilometers north of Prague. The first two transports would be men between the ages of eighteen and fifty, who, if they volunteered, would be joined by their immediate family within a few weeks. Hearing this, my father and grandfather signed up and, just before they boarded the train, came to visit me in the hospital. I had just had my tonsils removed. So here I was in the hospital and could not even say goodbye to my beloved grandfather and my dad. They gave me a big hug, and brought me *zmrzlina* (ice cream), the only thing I could eat, because I couldn’t speak at all, it hurt so much. They said they would be okay, assuring me that we

would see each other soon. I didn't quite understand and was very sad, but later my mom explained to me and, thinking that we would soon be together again, I calmed down, somehow."

Suffocating dread must have crept up slowly on Gidon's parents and so many others. The small humiliations. The arrests. The yellow stars. The posters pasted on the city walls and lampposts ordering the Jews to do this and that, no longer allowing them in this park or that café or this bus. The appearance of German soldiers sporting their gray uniforms, marching down streets and over bridges. The wondering where the neighbor went or if the neighbor talked. The pulling down of the blinds at night. The radio announcements. Going out to shop with clipped ration cards. Trying to live when your bank account has been confiscated by the Reich. The knock on the door. The order to report to the train station. The dread. The disbelief. What do you pack? Bring your valuables, they said. And something warm.

“**GIDON** “Within ten days of my father and grandfather's transport, my mother and I received a notice from the Germans that we, too, were to be shipped out to Térézin. I remember being quite happy—aha! The Germans are keeping their promise, and we are going to be reunited! I helped my mother pack our suitcases and roll up our blankets. We arrived at the central *Bahnhof* [train station] with all our personal belongings by 12 p.m. the next day, December 12, 1941. It was sheer madness. What to take, what to leave behind? How much can we carry? What about blankets, sheets, pillows? Warm clothing, winter things, which shoes, how much and what food for how many days? We took as much as my mother and I

could carry and hoped for the best. We were motivated by our fear of the Germans, and the hope that we would be reunited with my dad and granddad. It is hard to imagine something like five hundred women and their children all camping out in the train station hall on the bare floor. We were one on top of the other, every centimeter accounted for. It was my first encounter with hell on earth. I tried not to cry, and even to be helpful to my mother, who was, most of the time, aggravated and tense. For two days, we slept there, ate whatever we had brought with us, stood in hour-long lines to relieve ourselves, and somehow also kept warm. It was, after all, December, the middle of the winter and bitterly cold.”

How frightened Gidon and his mother must have been. What did Doris tell Gidon, and what did he really understand? I wondered if I could have kept my cool with my kids. Doris had no real idea of what her future held.

Peeking out from behind the last building on the block only half a block away were a steeple and lush green treetops. Was that the same park Gidon remembered? We walked over, and, sure enough, there was the small park his grandfather Alfred used to take him to. The square, called náměstí Míru, is presided over by the towering Church of St. Ludmilla and lined with neatly clipped grass and flowers. The playground is gone. We sat on a bench, and I made small talk with a grandmother with her grandchild in a stroller. The baby had so many teeth.

“Yes!” the grandmother exclaimed proudly. “Even the dentist says so!”

There was something else Gidon wanted to do while we were in Prague. We took a taxi to the New Jewish Cemetery, which was

only a few minutes away. This lush, sprawling, stately cemetery is where Franz Kafka is buried, and we beelined to see his grave, which was festooned with stones, poems, and other remembrances from literary tourists. But that's not why we were there. We were there to find the grave of Gidon's grandmother.

Theresa, or "Theresie," as she was affectionately called, was Gidon's paternal grandmother. She had passed away a few months before the first transports started and was buried in Prague. In some ways, I thought, she was spared: she never made it on the transport to Terezin with the rest of the family. Had she done so at her age, she likely wouldn't have lasted very long. Her husband, Alfred, was dead within a year after his arrival there.

Theresie's resting place is toward the back of the cemetery, along with other people who didn't have elaborate grave markers or family plots. On a past visit, Gidon couldn't find his grandmother's grave; there was too much snow on the ground. But not on this warm summer day; the ground was musty and loamy, covered with ivy and leaves. The cemetery was quiet, as they are wont to be. The dense foliage of trees created scattered patterns of moving sunlight over the graves. Gidon and I had the crinkled paperwork showing us which part of the cemetery Theresie was buried in, and which plot. But even with the help of a tall, silent cemetery worker in dirty overalls, look as we might, we could not find her grave. We searched for over an hour, scraping dirt and ivy back from marker after marker. The cemetery worker apologized and ruefully disappeared back over the vines and into the trees. Gidon sat down on a bench, full of emotion but silent.

"It's a pity," he said finally.

On our way out of the cemetery, Gidon and I noticed memorial plaques along the cemetery walls. On them are the names of family members killed in the Holocaust. No exact dates of death, but the years of transports and the camps they were sent to. Treblinka, Auschwitz, Dachau, Belzec, Majdanek,

and others. What a miserable constellation of places to die a horrible death. As we passed by the office of the cemetery, I was inspired to push for more information. Maybe we could show the man in charge our paperwork and ask again. There had to be a way to find Theresie. Gidon might never have this chance again.

The nice man in the office spoke to Gidon in Czech and in German. A few words in English were thrown in, too. How could this be, we asked? We knew Gidon's family had salvaged at least some resources when they fled to Prague. We knew that they buried Gidon's grandmother here. The man explained that, at the time Gidon's grandmother died, Jewish burials were done quickly and secretly. Jews didn't want to draw attention to themselves. Later, he went on, during the forty-year Soviet rule over Czechoslovakia, religious institutions and especially Judaism were under an "officially sanctioned hostile policy," so synagogues and cemeteries were neglected and fell into a state of disrepair. Only in recent years were the more remote sections of the cemetery being cleared and help offered to locate graves for those looking.

What the man didn't mention to Gidon and me, and perhaps he didn't know, was that in the early 1980s, over one hundred thousand Jewish headstones were looted by the Soviet regime to "revamp" Wenceslas Square in the center of Prague's historic district. In May 2020, as Prague set to again revamp and restore this large public square, Jewish headstones were discovered. They had been taken from Jewish cemeteries in Prague and broken into pieces and used as paving stones.¹ Gidon and I had spent so much time on our hands and knees looking for Theresie's headstone, thinking we would find it under the ivy. In reality, she might have been right under our feet, and under those of thousands of tourists, the whole time.

Gidon and I hopped on a vintage-seeming trolley car back toward the part of Prague where we were staying. Very quickly,

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we realized that we were on the wrong trolley and wound up on the other side of the Vltava, the side that had not been spruced up or “revamped” for tourists. Here the buildings and streets were slightly dilapidated and bore the Brutalist stamp of the former Soviet occupiers. We sat at a café, ordered ice cream, and watched a miniature street-sweeper clean up the detritus of the recent past.

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CHAPTER 4
KARLOVY VARY



Karlovy Vary is a name that rolls around on my tongue like something sweet, like the holiday season. It is more widely known as Karlsbad, its German name. The Czech Republic is cupped on its north, southeastern and southwestern sides by Germany and bordered by Poland on its northeast side; it sits north of Austria. Slovakia is directly to the southeast.

It is interesting how the tumbler of time has arranged and rearranged European empires, dynasties, and nations over and over again. In my lifetime, many countries have disappeared into new ones. Former Czechoslovakia is one of those, splitting, in 1993, in the “velvet divorce” into Czechia and Slovakia. Yugoslavia is now Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. The former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia were both parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as were Hungary and Austria. And others. It gets confusing.

Gidon’s family were from all over the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They came from Vienna and various small villages that dotted the landscape all the way to Karlovy Vary, which is in the C-shaped region that borders Germany. During the twentieth century, this area came to be known as the Sudetenland, so

named after a mountain range. In 1921, it was estimated that more than three million ethnic Germans lived there. This population saw itself as different, as German rather than Czech. The fact that they lived side by side with Czechs was not a big issue. Until it was.

With the rise of Hitler, who sought to rebuild a German empire (i.e., a Reich), German inhabitants of the Sudetenland saw a chance to be reunified with Germany. Many of those German Czechs were enthusiastically on board with Hitler's hateful anti-Semitic rhetoric. Things heated up with the rise of Hitler, and in the 1930s, there were pogroms across the Sudeten. Jews living in this area were not large in number, comparatively speaking. Still, as their German-Jewish counterparts lost their rights in the Nuremberg Laws, they must have been terrified.

Anti-Semitism wasn't new to European Jews, though. It was forbidden for Jews to live in Karlovy Vary for almost three hundred years, from 1499 to 1793, after which Jewish peddlers were allowed to do business and be on their way. A permanent Jewish presence in Karlovy Vary didn't gather any kind of momentum until after 1848. It must have been sometime around then that Gidon's ancestors arrived.

In Europe at that time and for centuries before, Jews were considered Jews first *then* conditional sub-citizens depending on social whims and political expediency. This conditionality was shared by Jews throughout Europe. Whether religious and living in small villages (*shtetls*) in eastern Europe, or secular (typically in the more urban areas of western Europe), Jews were at times merely tolerated and at other times savagely attacked in pogroms. Surely, in the modern age of the 1920s and '30s, anti-Semitism would fade away, wouldn't it?

"Hope," as Thucydides said, "is an expensive commodity. It is better to be prepared."



Karlovy Vary is not far from Prague, as the crow flies: about 70 miles. But the day Gidon and I traveled there in our rental car, over miles and miles of countryside, there was roadwork. A lot of roadwork. But it didn't seem to bother Gidon. The closer we got to this western part of the Czech Republic, the more animated he became. He had already told me again and again how beautiful it was, the place of his birth—how wooded, how spectacularly beautiful, how historic. From what I could see out the window, I was beginning to have serious doubts. I saw nothing but miles of flatland and fields and road construction.

The villages were few and far between and looked stuck in time (and not in a quaint way) with the indeterminate architecture of a vaguely post-Soviet kind. The farther we got from Prague, the more uneasy I felt. I had read about the current rise of anti-Semitism in Europe and in the Czech Republic as well. We looked for a place to eat lunch in yet another village that had seen better days. We sat down in a dark, mostly empty pub-like restaurant with some locals who were drinking beer at a table in the corner. They glanced up at us inquisitively. Whether they were unaccustomed to tourists or were merely curious, I did not know. I found myself hauling out all the stereotypes of Eastern Europeans: big-boned and muscular, pale, a bit flabby, hard-edged, and vaguely thuggish.

Where had I gotten such ideas? Too many movies, I supposed. I wondered what would happen if I said that Gidon was from there, that he was a Jew, that he had been in a concentration camp, that his family had been murdered. Would these locals be interested or defensive? Why did I even have that train of thought? Should they feel guilty or responsible for something they likely had nothing to do with?

Gidon was a bit quieter than usual, I noticed. I figured he was simply hungry, tired, and anxious to get to Karlovy Vary.

. . .

Gidon was right. Karlovy Vary is incredibly beautiful. It is located at what amounts to the bottom of a densely forested ravine with a river winding through it. A mile or two away is the larger, more modern city that the tourists skip. Nestled as Karlovy Vary is, in such alpine geography, it reminded me of the part of northern California where I had grown up. Scents of pine needles, tree sap, moss, rustling rivers, and dying leaves wafted over everything. As did the smell of sulfur. The big draw in Karlovy Vary is and has been, for hundreds of years, the mineral water hot springs and geysers. Famous figures from history who came to Karlovy Vary for the health benefits of the water include people like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Frédéric Chopin, Ludwig van Beethoven, and a long list of now-obscure European royalty. Taking the cure in the form of balneology was all the rage.

Karlovy Vary is a spa town all right, but not the kind that I am accustomed to, with mauve carpeting and piped-in music and hot stone massages. No, this is old-school. The main street is lined with spas touting not just the health benefits of the water but numerous other health treatments as well. Things like the cleansings of toxins and minor medical procedures that are, I am quite sure, probably illegal in most places.

The stately Imperial Hotel, built in 1912, overlooks the town. White and very Stephen King-esque, it was designed to help some of the seventy thousand-plus annual tourists who came to visit Karlovy Vary (previous to the First World War) find more luxurious digs. I was particularly keen to see the famed Grandhotel Pupp. I know it's not pronounced *poop*, but far be it from me to skip an opportunity for humor on this emotionally arduous trip. In any event, the Grandhotel Pupp is purportedly the visual inspiration for the Wes Anderson film *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, and the resemblance is clear. To be fair, though, the Imperial Hotel looks quite similar, so this Hollywood myth might have some holes in it. Inside the lobby of the Grandhotel, there was an enormous, stylized photograph of Morgan Freeman,

who apparently is a fan of the Grandhotel Pupp, as were many other celebrities whose names are engraved on little gold stars that litter the hotel driveway and sidewalk like a walk of fame.

I wondered what this now-thriving spa town had been like just after the war, whether the spas were still open and, if they were, who went. They weren't, I later learned, and people didn't. The occupying Soviet Army made good use of the Imperial Hotel, though, sending officers there for recuperation. Both the Imperial Hotel and the Grandhotel Pupp had been nationalized during the Soviet era. In the 1990s, as the Soviet Union began its fall apart, the hotels were privatized for pennies on the dollar. The getting must have been good. The end of the main drag that the Grandhotel Pupp occupies is populated by a decidedly wealthier class of tourists enjoying gelato and luxury shopping experiences. The other end is comprised mainly of budget tourists, like Gidon and me. We strolled through the streets, took pictures, bought Gidon a funny hat, and ate spicy sausages with horseradish, mustard, and pickles.

I was struck by the incongruous fact that Gidon hailed from a resort town, a vacation spot. Well, when in Rome, as they say. I booked an appointment at the illustriously named Spa Number Five. We were in a spa town, and I wanted a spa experience. Gidon and I sank into deep, stainless-steel tubs of a decidedly medical nature. I snapped a photo of Gidon in his tub. In the picture, he is giving a big thumbs-up and grinning. Later, we sat in the salt cave in awkward chaise lounges of the rickety variety. Valiantly, patiently, we tried to enjoy the benefits of sitting awkwardly in rickety chairs in a salt cave. It was clammy.

At its height, in 1930, the Jewish community in Karlovy Vary numbered about 2,200 Jews. In 1945, after the war ended, only twenty-six individuals returned. Of those, Gidon and his mother were two. The synagogue had been destroyed, and homes and property were in the hands of other, new owners (or, perhaps,

occupants is more like it). But Gidon's mother had pluck, and the mover she and Gidon's father paid to move their belongings to Prague must have been shocked when a knock came on his door. He had skipped the delivery and stolen everything. Doris was there, a policeman in tow. She wanted her stuff back, and she got it. Ironically, had the man delivered the items as he was paid to do, it was unlikely that Doris or Gidon would have been able to recover any of it after they were liberated. Gidon did not recall whether the man was punished for his crime. Importantly, the family photographs were recovered; without them, Gidon would never have known the likeness of his great-grandparents, nor possess pictures of himself as an infant in the arms of his father.

“**GIDON** “I can't really remember our lovely second-floor home, except from stories my mother told me. She had spoken about the maid that had lived with us, that took care of me as a baby, the bell my mother would ring every time she needed something done by the maid, and the busy streets, and my family's large, used scrap-iron lot, which was guarded by a frightening, large German Shepherd that I had to stay away from, lest he bite me.”

The home where Gidon lived as a toddler is no longer standing, but Gidon already knew that. He'd looked for it a few years ago. But, he told me, the house where he and his mother lived for three years after liberation is still there. It had a horse stable downstairs, he said. This seemed to me, minimally, like odd zoning and probably an embellishment of Gidon's memory. But the morning that our GPS guided us over hill and over dale, through narrow streets, and over bridges, we indeed came to the building, just where Gidon said it would be. There was a dilapidated stable in the overgrown courtyard. Gidon seemed

quite comfortable poking around, and if the house seemed smaller to him today than it was in his memory, he showed no sign. I thought of the emaciated and disoriented little boy who returned in 1945.

This place must have been like heaven compared to the concentration camp. Yet his father and grandparents did not return with him, and Gidon would not know for some months what had happened to his father. I wondered how the neighbors greeted these ragged survivors when they came back to Karlovy Vary, whether they were welcoming or suspicious. Friendly or cold. Guilty or conscience-free.

While we were exploring, an elderly woman came out, curious about what we were doing. In his broken Czech, Gidon told the woman that he had lived in the house years ago, after the war.

“Ja, ja, after the war,” the woman enthusiastically agreed. I asked her name, but I’ve forgotten it now. I told her I would write and send her photos, but I didn’t do that, either. I’m not sure why. I felt bad about it for a while, and then I didn’t.

Only a couple of blocks from the house was where Gidon had attended school for the first time in his life. He was far behind his classmates, having not received any education for the previous four years. He was in a lower grade, too, and physically smaller than his classmates after having been severely malnourished for so long. One day, after the teacher stepped out of the room, a kid called Gidon a “dirty Jew.” Gidon punched him in the nose. When the teacher returned and saw the blood, Gidon told him what had happened. The teacher shrugged, and that was that.

The day we left Karlovy Vary, there were news cameras, booming music, and barricades outside our hotel. A triathlon was underway, and cyclists swooped intermittently through town to scattered applause. Inside, the concierge raced back and forth

between the front desk and the parking garage; she was the only employee at the front desk of this Russian-owned hotel with more than 150 rooms. Many of the big hotels in Karlovy Vary were owned by Russians. The concierge said she was from Bulgaria, and that, yes, she missed her family very much but was happy to have a job. She apologized for the inconvenience, but the management kept reducing the staff. She gave us a business card and scrawled her mobile phone number on the back. That seemed normal. I tried not to let my imagination wander too far into the mists of the predatory, post-Soviet privatization, and probable conditions for the thousands of spa town workers in Karlovy Vary. Today was a new day, and we were headed east.

“Northeast,” Gidon added.

Today was a new day, and we were headed northeast.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gidon Lev, eighty-five years old, delivers flowers part-time, is an avid reader, and volunteers at the Jaffa Institute, where he teaches English to elementary school students. Julie Gray's writing has appeared in the Huffington Post, Moment Magazine, the Times of Israel, and others. She has volunteered with The Afghan Women's Writing Project, Creativity for Peace, the Middle East Partnership Initiative, and Kids for Peace. Gidon and Julie met in 2017. They have been Loving Life Buddies ever since.

