



THE BACK STORIES

Nora Jean & Michael Levin

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Grieg-Begegnungsstätte

Talstraße 10

Leipzig



July 1978: Passing Through

“I do not regret not to have stopped. . . .The people, the town, the culture I knew and loved are dead, and there is nothing for me to look for.”

Hirsch Bieler: Letter from Karlovy Var (formerly Carlsbad)

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Jean:

In 1978 Michael and I received a letter from my father (then 78), written from Czechoslovakia where he'd gone for "the cure." My parents had emigrated from Palestine to the United States in 1937/8 with my older sister Tania (then age 5). They settled in Philadelphia Pennsylvania, a city with similar culture. With portable skills -- he in the independent oil business; she as a concert pianist and music teacher -- they began a new chapter in their lives.

Following family tradition, I tucked the letter away in a box and rediscovered it two years ago. Here's what else he said:

“I took the train from Berlin to Leipzig. In the compartment there were two women from Leipzig and they informed about everything that happened since I left. The trip itself -- as I recognized every Hamlet, every City -- was a great emotional experience for me. This was mostly the part I covered with my bicycle for many

years, when I traveled as a salesman selling Machine Oil and Axle Grease to the German farmers.

The train conductor, a lady also from Leipzig, urged me to stop overnight in Leipzig. But after she studied my transit visa, issued by the East German pass control, said she is so sorry as it said not to interrupt the voyage.

The train stopped in Leipzig for 15 minutes. I walked off to Bahnsteig #15, where we left from Leipzig 42 years ago (1936), and with great mixed emotions, returned to my (train) compartment.”

Hirsch & Anna return to Leipzig, 1978



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Jean:

3 months later my parents return to Leipzig together. This is my mother Anna Bieler's DDR visa to Leipzig for that 2-night stay.

My father was born in Grajewo Poland on the border with East Prussia at the turn of the century and survived the hardships of occupation there during WW I. He came to Leipzig without papers in 1919 -- **100 years ago next month** -- in search of a better life.

My mother Anna Burstein was born in 1908 in Kishinev, then in Bessarabia, part of the Russian Empire. It was annexed by Romania during WW I. She was the youngest of four musical prodigies. She arrived in Leipzig on a student visa in 1926 to study at the Conservatory, where her older sisters had graduated before the War.

My parents met in Leipzig and married here in 1931. My sister Tania was born here in 1933.

They walk the city . . .



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Jean:

We did not know what was in these pictures when we first saw them. We did not know their full meanings for many years.

Anna takes pictures



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Jean:

These pictures become slides placed in Kodak carousels in no particular order -- unlabeled, often upside down, backwards or sideways. Many of them are stored in little cardboard boxes.

A 4-hour dinner begins a 40-year journey



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Jean:

In 1978 Michael and I were raising our own family in Washington DC. My parents came to visit after their return from Leipzig. We met for dinner. Four hours later they were still telling us about their Leipzig years.

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That night we realized how little we knew about their former lives. How did they get to Leipzig? What was their "before"? Why did they decide to leave Germany in 1936? How did they get out? Why did they settle in Philadelphia, where we had no family? Why didn't they bring their parents and siblings to America?

The next day we proposed an idea. Michael, the writer-lawyer, would write a historical novel based on their stories, covering the first 50 years of the 20th century -- in his spare time. I was juggling child-care with running a shared office business while engaged on a research study destined for U.S. Congressional

committees. Still, I would do the background research. If they were ready to talk, we were ready to listen.

We brought a tape recorder to Philadelphia. My father started at the beginning, talking about the village where he was born. My mother was not so enthusiastic -- until our interviews turned to her.

I began transcribing our tapes into typed transcripts for their review. I began my research in the card catalogue of our local library -- the Library of the U.S. Congress.

Mike:

Over the next 5 years, on family visits to Philadelphia, Palm Beach FL and Scottsdale AZ we continued recording -- sometimes one on one, sometimes four of us together. My father-in-law went through his pictures and began writing names, dates and places on them. My mother-in-law dug out her photo albums from and after Leipzig. We expanded our interviews to include many of their Leipzig-era friends living in the US. In 1980 we went to NYC to interview my mother's Leipzig conservatory friend Halina Neuman, by then a retired piano professor living across from Lincoln Center.

We traveled to their past locations, with and without them. Gradually we began to piece together the huge puzzle encompassing destinations in Russia, Poland, Germany, and Palestine..

Decades later, Anna's 1978 slides produced *AHA moments* that revealed context and meaning.

Hirsch Suwalski (1900-1985) is 19 when he arrives in Leipzig from Poland seeking a better life and a homeland

It takes decades to realize his goal:



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Mike:

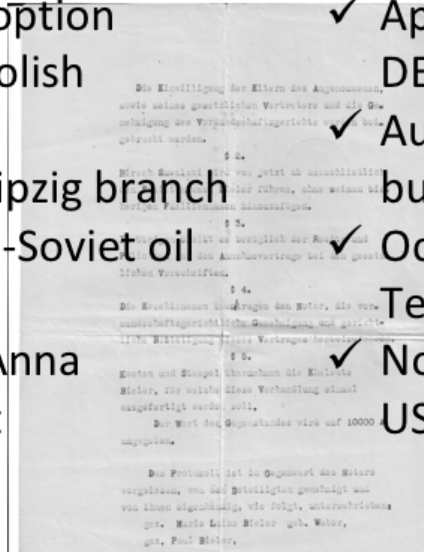
Here's some of what we learned. In his journey my father in law sheds his birthdate and birth name in various identity papers. He becomes a naturalized American Citizen a few months before Jean is born. Growing up, she thinks he is Hirsch Bieler, born in 1902. Both of those 'facts' are wrong.

Grajewo sits on the then-East Prussian border. Hirsch's first job is supporting his family during WWI while his father is stuck on the other side of the Front in Kiev. When the War ends, he goes over the border to Weimar Germany -- without papers. He lands in Leipzig where he has cousins & gets a student visa, hoping to complete his formal education. But his money runs out and he has to drop out of school. He loses his student resident status and gets a letter that he will be deported by Saxony to Poland. He looks for a room in nearby Papitz -- which is not in Saxony & might not deport him. By luck, he meets Marie-Luise Bieler She & her husband Paul -- German Lutherans in their fifties -- have no

children. They invite him to rent a room in their house.

Hirsch in Leipzig (1919-1936)

- ✓ 1921: Adult Adoption
- ✓ 1921: Rejects Polish citizenship
- ✓ 1926: Heads Leipzig branch DEROP, German-Soviet oil import firm
- ✓ 1931: Marries Anna Burstein, pianist
- ✓ April 1933: Dismissed from DEROP, forms own company
- ✓ August 1936: Sells to 'Aryan buyer'
- ✓ October 1936: Leaves for Tel Aviv.
- ✓ November 1937: Arrives in US



Mike:

During his 1st 2 Leipzig years he makes some life choices.

1921: Adopted by Paul and Marie Bieler. They live on NordeStrasse in the small town of Papitz, now part of Schkeuditz.

1921: Chooses to be "stateless" with a Nansen Passport rather than accept Polish citizenship.

1931: Finally gets the girl he 1st proposed to in 1929.

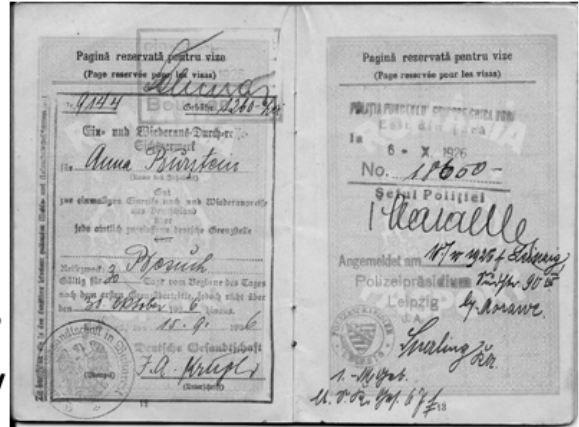
April 1933: In one of Leipzig's 1st 'Aryanizations' he's dismissed from his position at DEROP. That day he learns Anna is pregnant. The next day he starts his own company. He sells that company to an "Aryan" buyer as part of his exit strategy.

October 1936: Hirsch, Anna & their small daughter Tania leave

Germany legally for Tel Aviv . They are admitted only months before the British curtail Jewish immigration to stop Arab anti-immigrant riots.

Anna in Leipzig (1926-1936)

- ✓ 1926-29 Leipzig Conservatory Graduates -- Piano
- ✓ 1931 Marries Hirsch Bieler-Suwalski
- ✓ 1933 Tania born
- ✓ 1934-36: Kulturbund concerts
- ✓ Oct. 1936: Departs for Tel Aviv



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Jean:

Anna leaves Kishinev in 1924 under the care of her older sister Rebecca (age 30), finishing only 11th grade but with an honors certificate in piano. Rebecca is a pianist who won the Chopin Prize here & the Rubinstein Prize at the Petersburg Conservatory -- during the Russian Revolution. She is invited by Mayor Dizengoff to teach and perform in the new city of Tel Aviv. Within 2 years Anna, then 18 leaves Tel Aviv via Kishinev to attend the Leipzig Conservatory like her sisters.

By 1936, when my parents leave Germany, my grandparents have left Kishinev to join my Aunt Rebecca and her family in Tel Aviv. My parents intend to settle there permanently. My father's Plan B is to come to the US, which had stopped most immigration from Europe. A few months after their arrival, he gets a surprise visa to America.

Over ice cream in a café they decide to leave. He comes to America under the U.S. Polish quota, which is less than 5000/year but has room. My mother is under the U.S. Romanian quota, which is only 400/year & won't have room till 1938. He goes first, travelling 2nd class on the *Queen Mary*. Anna & Tania follow 8 months later.

Now you know everything. Let's go back to the first pictures we presented.

1978 return:
They walk the city. . .

13 Koenig-Johann-Strasse
(now Tchaikowski Strasse)



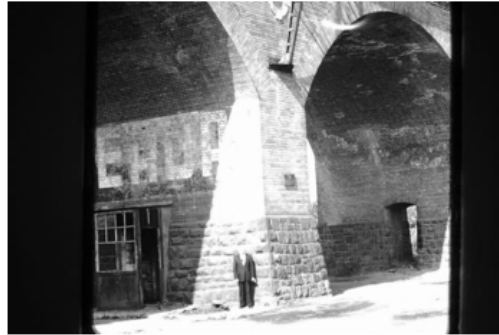
10

Jean:

This is their apartment, **on the ground floor**, between 1931-1936 They live on this lovely street, which ends at an entrance to the Johanna Park.

They travel memory lanes...

NordStrasse, Papitz (near Schkeuditz) ,



52 BerlinerStrasse, near the Hauptbahnhof



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Jean: Left, NordStrasse, Papitz: At the home where my father lived from 1920-1929 , **where** he got the name Bieler. **The house, built in 1912 by Paul Bieler, is still standing.** The woman next to my father **turns out to be** the niece of **Paul's wife Marie** -- still living in the same house.

Right: This is my father standing at the site of his former lubricants business, **52 BerlinerStrasse**, a few blocks from the Hauptbahnhof.

Center: They find a surviving **wall sign for DEROP**, the Soviet-German oil importing business whose 60-person Leipzig branch my father headed before he was dismissed in April 1933.

1982 Leipzig

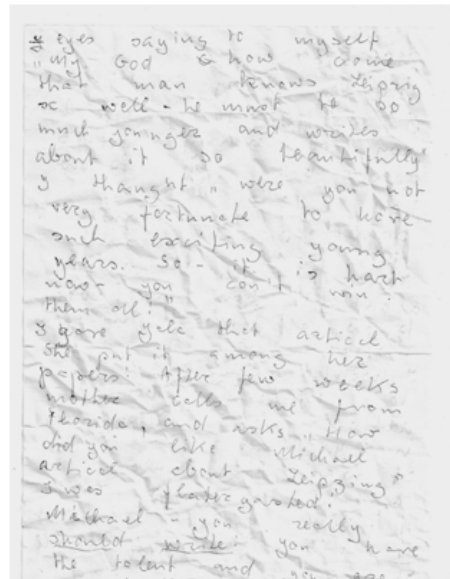


Mike:

In 1982, after a business trip to Germany, I took the Rhine train from Bonn & met my in-laws in Baden-Baden. We flew to West Berlin, crossed Checkpoint Charlie, and went to Leipzig for three days.

The next year the *NY Times* published my story about part of that trip.

Jan. 1984, New York City: Halina writes a note



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Mike:

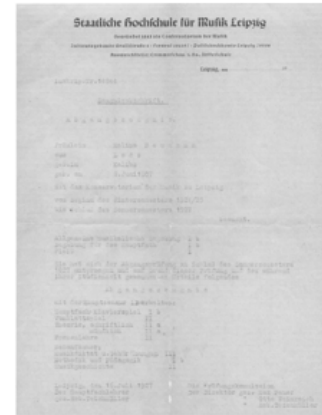
After the *NY Times* article I received some fan letters. This one was from Halina, in Jan. 1984:

"I can't believe my eyes. I say to myself, "My God how come that man knows Leipzig so well — he must be so much younger and [yet] writes about it so beautifully. I thought - " you were so very fortunate to have such exciting young years." After [a] few weeks, [Anna] calls me and asks -- "How do you like Michael's article about Leipzig?" I never noticed the name. I was flabbergasted."

And one from a former Leipziger now called Frederick Rose living in Canada. He wants to know how I transported myself to Leipzig in the 1930s -- it's not possible I lived there then. He wants to be the first person to buy my planned novel, when it comes out.

Halina Neuman (1908-1998) is 17 when she arrives to Leipzig from Lodz Poland

- ✓1924: Conservatory
- ✓1927: Graduates -- Piano
- ✓1929: Marries Jacob Schulsinger
- ✓1931: Jola born
- ✓1934-36 : Kulturbund concerts
- ✓Mar. 1938: Salzburg, Austria
- ✓Oct. 1938: Deported from Leipzig



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Ken Hoffman:

My grandmother Halina met Anna when they were students at the Conservatory. The two women were the same age, but my grandmother began her studies right out of high school in Lodz. She was a pupil of Robert Teichmuller, one of the great teachers at the Conservatory.

My grandfather Jacob Schulsinger was born in Poland but had lived in Leipzig from childhood. He met Halina in Lodz on a business trip, just before she came to Leipzig. On his end, it was love at first sight. After graduating, Halina went back to Poland and concertized. Jacob brought her back to Leipzig when they married. My mother Jola was born here. Although Anna and Hirsch left Germany in 1936, my grandparents and my mother did not.

Halina's Journey after 1938

- ❖ 1938-40 Warsaw
- ❖ 1940-41 Lvov
- ❖ 1941-43 Warsaw Ghetto
- ❖ 1943-44 Warsaw
- ❖ 1944-45 German Labor Camp
- ❖ 1945-46 Reichenbach (Lower Silesia) work camp
- ❖ 1946 Vienna
- ❖ 1947-51 London
- ❖ 1951 --- Newark

... of each family member during the last 12 years.

Name	Dates		Town, Village, Province and
	from	to	
Halina	1938	1940	Warsaw
	1940	1941	Lvov
	1941	1943	Warsaw Ghetto
	1943	1944	Warsaw
	1944	1945	German Labor Camp
	1945	1946	Reichenbach (L.S.)
	1946	1947	Vienna
	1947	1951	London



Ken:

This document -- which we only discovered in the past few months -- is from 1951 applications that my grandmother completed in London before she emigrated to the United States. They show that her journey through the Holocaust was a difficult one. My mother's journey was similar, with both ending up in America. My mother went to London on a kinder transport in 1948. Halina followed. My mother came to the US as a student in 1949. After she married, Halina followed again.

September 1989, Leipzig



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Mike:

In September 1989 we come to Leipzig -- now with just Anna, as Hirsch died in 1985. We celebrate the Jewish New Year with the local Gemeinde during the March of Light demonstrations, just before the Berlin Wall comes down. We visit the Leipzig Conservatory and the Koenig-Johan-Strasse apartment, and gain entry to both.

Describes the pictures

Time Marches On



Germany is reunified. Technology expands horizons. The Internet is born. We inherit a trove of materials from Anna & Hirsch.

Mike:

Our children grow up. The chapters, research files, tapes and transcripts are stored in our basement with boxes of possessions we inherit after Anna dies in 2003.

Then, at a 2009 high school reunion, a former classmate— now a part-time theater director in Los Angeles – asks what I’ve been writing. I tell him about the project. He asks for a “treatment.” He wants to write short plays based on these stories. He wants to hear the characters' *actual voices*.

Jean scans the typed transcripts, allowing me to salvage workable sections. We write one play. It’s never produced.

Jean:

For the first time in 3 decades I listen to the tapes so I can edit

them. For years we debated how to use this material, as fiction or as fact. AhA! -- the vivid voices on these tapes will tell their own story.

We search for translators for our inherited documents --- newspaper articles, official papers, personal correspondence, mostly in Hebrew, German, Russian and Yiddish.

Mike:

We resume our joint project, now as an annotated oral history of Jean's parents, their relatives and their friends during the first half of the 20th century. We add context for the revolutions, counter-revolutions, catastrophes and triumphs through which they moved. The translated documents fill in gaps of these stories.

Jean:

In 2010 my sister Tania and her husband visit Leipzig for the 1st time since she left (1936). The next year she returns with her daughter, my niece Stephanie, to participate in the City's Schalom Week. [Stephanie is in the audience tonight. (stand)] We follow their footsteps in 2012. We give two presentations. One at Ariowitsch Haus, on Hirsch's Leipzig cousins who invited him here and later perished. The other at the Conservatory, on the 100-year music connections of my family here.

June 2012: "Schalom Week" "Leipzig Legacies" Presentation



Jean:

That presentation includes slides about Anna and Halina's performances "for Jews only" audiences with the Leipzig Jüdischer Kulturbund, and a newspaper notice for their 1934 2-piano concert.

On a Schalom Week walking tour we discover Dittrichring 18 -- now the Telegraph Café -- where that 1st concert took place.

Michael and I look at each other. Wouldn't it be amazing to bring the past to life by recreating those Kulturbund concerts here, in Leipzig?

June 2015: "Schalom" Week Leo Baeck Institute/State Library Exhibit



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Mike:

In 2012 we meet Gabriele Goldfuss and her marvelous staff. In 2014 she invites us to NYC for a Lincoln Center Gewandhaus Orchestra Concert celebrating the 25th anniversary of German Reunification and Leipzig's 1000th birthday. Gabriele introduces us to Carol Kahn Strauss of the Leo Baeck Institute, who is planning a 2015 exhibit on "Jewish Life in Leipzig before 1933" at the Leipzig State Library

Jean:

When I heard this, I said "I think we need to talk more."

2017-18 -- *Two Pianos: Playing for Life*

The event takes form, finds a venue . . .



Partner Gail Prensky, Founder/Director
The Jüdische Kulturbund Project, Washington DC

Partner Kris Rudzinski, Branch Director
Settlement Music School, Philadelphia PA

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Jean:

By 2017 our oral history ‘volume’ is nearly complete & we are exploring ways to share our material. On an internet search I discover the Judische Kulturbund Project, a few blocks from us in Washington. We join forces to create a performance event with live classical music and archival projections centered around the Leipzig Kulturbund concerts given by Anna and Halina.

We arrange to perform at Philadelphia's Settlement Music School, where Anna began performing and teaching when she came to America. We reserve space for 9 June 2018 -- the week of Anna and Halina's 110th birthdays.

In Philadelphia we find a talented exhibit designer, Stephanie Reyer. She creates four exhibit cases and the 10 the standing pop-up exhibit panels.

...builds a performance cast, including. . .

Narrator/ Archivist
Dr. Kenneth Hoffman



Ken : Halina's Grandson; Oldest son of Jola Schulsinger Hoffman

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Highlight relationship with grandmother, mother and their pre-America history; sorting through boxes and albums of Halina materials retrieved from my brothers – first alone, then with Michael & Jean. We share stories and photos for the upcoming event. Among the treasures we find are Halina's Conservatory diploma; an exquisite series of photographs taken by my grandfather from 1928 – 1938; hand-colored posters for her post-War performances in Warsaw; her DP papers; her affidavit for US citizenship. Many of these items survive because she sent them to her sister-in-law in London before the War.

Then I'm recruited as a narrator as well as an information source. I have to recite German names. I'm delighted and terrified.

. . . and Pianists!!

The Varshavski-Shapiro Piano Duo



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Jean:

We've got the script. We've got the stage. Now we need two women pianists who perform on two pianos. We are looking for women - preferably with young children like Anna and Halina in Leipzig -- who juggle work, family and careers. We find them in Wisconsin through their agent. In May 2018 we go to Wisconsin to meet them in person and read through the script. They won't play for us because they haven't rehearsed enough. We don't hear them perform until 2 days before the June 9 premiere.

Stasi & Diana:

Give some background on how you came together, why you're in Wisconsin, and your repertoire of 4 hands & 2 pianos.

[Repeat what you said before & on the Philadelphia Highlights video, and anything you want to say about the *Two Pianos*

experience since then.]

Two Pianos Premiere

9 June 2018, Settlement Music School, Philadelphia

Performance



Discussion



Exhibit



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Stasi & Diana: Here we are playing at the Premiere. It was our first trip to Philadelphia.

Ken: In the center is the performers' question and answer session with the audience – a wonderful warm audience.

Mike: At right, our grandsons Caden and Benjamin (then 9 and 6) at the Exhibit. When our son Jeremy asked him what the show was about, Caden said: "It's about how music and art are really important, even in the darkest times." They are in the audience tonight [stand up. please].

Varshavski-Shapiro Piano Duo
• Mendelssohn, *Andante et Allegro brillante* for 4 hands,
Op. 92



Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847) was a composer, pianist and Music Director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. In 1843, he founded the Conservatory **Conservatorium der Musik (Conservatory of Music)**. It is the oldest university school of music in Germany.

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Jean:

So, now you know the backstory, have seen some pictures, and heard from the performers of tomorrow's *Two Pianos: Playing for Life* performance.

Felix Mendelssohn -- composer, pianist and Music Director of the Gewandhaus Orchestra -- also was the founder of the Leipzig Conservatory, where we will be giving our performance tomorrow.

So, with a nod of thanks to Felix, and to explain why we are sitting here by a grand piano in this lovely salon, it's time for you to hear our pianists play for you.

Diana. We are in Leipzig. We will play Mendelssohn, of course.