

It was in the early 1990s that my father first asked me to help him tell the story of his cataclysmic coming-of-age in Hitler's Berlin. The result was this revealing and unusual memoir, originally published in 1996 (by a small press in the U.S.) as *Soaring Underground*. The idiosyncratic title was my paean to its protagonist: Lothar, the wily Jewish youth whose light would not be extinguished even in the darkest of times and places.

This audacious life-force would remain the essence of Larry "Lothar" Orbach (1924- 2008), unstoppable dreamer and doer, steadfast son of his people, lover of all humanity.

I am deeply grateful to I.B.Tauris and especially to editor Tatiana Wilde for recognizing the raw power and instructiveness of his story, and for giving it new life, in a new and unsettling day, as [Young Lothar](#).

In co-authoring this memoir I became a writer/daughter on a mission: to give voice to the suffering, joys and complex humanity of not only Lothar, but the 6 million European Jews – 1.5 million of them, children – who were killed under systematic, targeted, state-sponsored genocide.

Yet my initial impulse, when my father approached me, was to avert my eyes and run. I wasn't sure I had the stomach to hear everything that had been done to Daddy, or (especially) everything Daddy had done. What caused all hesitation to vanish, only a few months later, was a most jarring encounter, something – literally – out of a book by Philip Roth.

Roth's father, Herman, regularly played cards with Larry at their neighborhood "Y." Larry was bowled over when the elder Roth invited him home to show a few pages of his nascent writings to the celebrated author-son.

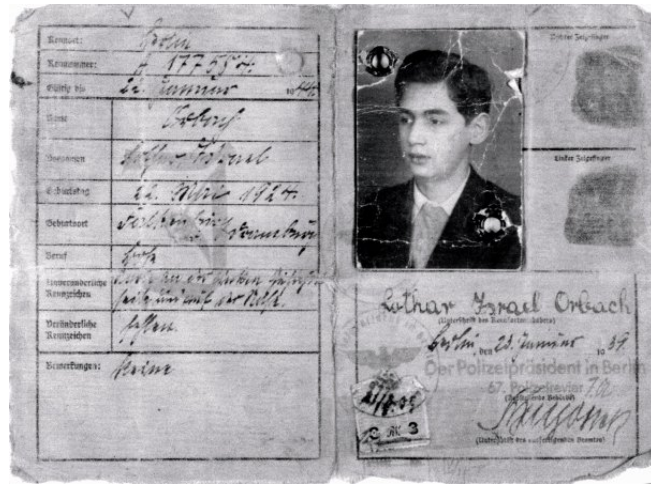
Prior to this, Larry had read only one of Philip Roth's masterworks: the carnal tour-de-force *Portnoy's Complaint*. In a comically misguided effort to impress a literary lion, Larry (unbeknownst to us) handed him a detailed scene of his loss of virginity. Missing from his baroque rewrite was its sobering context: that "shacking up" with lonely Frau Trudy was all that stood between him and streets teeming with Gestapo.

Roth leafed through the excerpt and offered no comment, reported my disappointed father, and everyone forgot about it. Except, evidently, Philip Roth.

In 1991 Roth published his own memoir, *Patrimony: A True Story*. More than 20 pages were devoted to a blistering caricature of (wrote TIME Magazine's reviewer) "a nutty Auschwitz survivor hustling his pornographic Holocaust novel."

I couldn't blame Roth for skewering my father. But I also couldn't let his reductive view of Lothar's death-defying/life-affirming journey become my patrimony.

And thus I committed to parting the standard veils between parent and child, to tell



Lothar's "kennkarte" ID (1937, at age 15). Note the large "J" underlying the left side of the document, and the middle name "Israel" mandated for all Jewish males. ("Sarah" for females.)



Nelly Orbach, hidden by a family of Communist women through the war's final years, wearing the coveted "Mother's Cross," a government-issued religious medallion (purchased on the black market) designating her as a proud mother of German soldiers.

the story of a hunted youth hungry to taste life in a lawless, apocalyptic city.

I was also a mother of young children back then, children who played blithely underfoot while I immersed myself in Lothar's harrowing world. What buoyed me was my belief that their lives would be as safe and secure as my own. My brother and I grew up fiercely loved and overprotected by our refugee parents and their proverbial "village": an enclave of New-Jersey-based Holocaust survivors determined to raise us, their "miracle" offspring, as a proud new generation of Jews – educated, empowered and

unconquerable.

I will never cease to be amazed by how these shattered souls managed to find their places in mid-twentieth-century America – with remarkable success, at least outwardly, despite virtually no social or psychological supports. It would be years before the word "Holocaust" would be designated to represent what had befallen them, years before "regular people" would be ready to hear their testimonies.

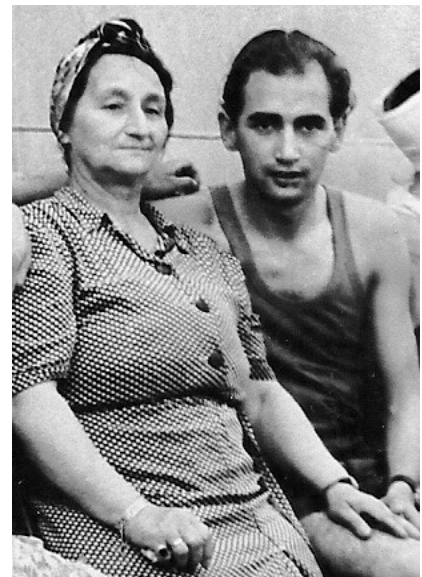
My brother and I were made to understand that our father's volatility and our mother's lingering sadness weren't about *us*, but about a monstrous injustice against which we could rail. And rail we did – through political and artistic endeavors, and unremitting dark humor. In our household there was gratitude always; silence, never. Although death and irretrievable loss hovered close by, we somehow felt unbroken and hopeful.

And yet.

Today, 21 years after the original publication of this memoir, I am no longer anyone's daughter. My once-cacophonous village of eyewitnesses to history is nearly silent. Today I am a grandmother of young children, children named in memory of my parents; and as they play underfoot, I am sometimes overcome by unfamiliar waves of deep, existential fear.

Studies have shown that offspring of Holocaust survivors may carry an "epigenetic inheritance" of trauma: actual alterations of the DNA code that make us "hypervigilant," attuned to every whisper of approaching danger.

No hypervigilance is requisite, as I write these words, to hear the escalating drumbeats of neo-fascism, racism, xenophobia. Communications platforms forging a global society also enable hate-groups to consolidate and flourish.



Lothar Orbach (22) and mother Nelly on ship bound for New York, 1946.

Crying out in unprecedented numbers are refugees, asylum seekers, and innocent civilians trapped in protracted armed conflicts.

These twenty-first-century realities have made Lothar's timeless story a timely one, a cautionary tale of how baseless hatred, scapegoating and authoritarianism can topple a civilized society's democratic structures and guiding principles.

The drumbeats also signal a resurgence of worldwide anti-Semitism in old tropes and new. Chillingly, Jew-hatred serves as the sole ideological point of agreement among extremists on vastly different points of the political spectrum. The State of Israel remains unrecognized by its neighbors, and often demonized by its detractors, despite ample proof of Jews' indigenesness to the land since antiquity. One would think that this, in tandem with the oppression,

exile and/or cleansing of Jews from countries around the globe, would place Jewish self-determination in a secure homeland among the numerous humanitarian imperatives of the region. Yet this is, increasingly, not the case.

What exists today is a terrible military and moral quagmire that is untenable for two peoples.

All this triggers my worst nightmare: that the world of my children and grandchildren – in the wake of an immediate-post-Holocaust era of "sympathy" for Jews that's characterized my own lifetime – might become more like the world of my parents and grandparents.

Lothar's story exhorts us that safeguarding democracy should not be left solely to governments. It lies in our own hands – hands mutually extended across cultures and beliefs and borders. We all carry the power to reject fear, discrimination and indifference; we all have the mandate to rethink even our most closely held narratives in the quest for a just society.

It reminds us that there is no force in the world more powerful – or elusive – than moral courage.

In 1983, in what was then East Berlin, I sat in the spartan flat of 70-year-old Sylvia Ebel, who as a 17-year-old Communist was Lothar's accomplice in so-called criminal activities. I asked her: "What gave you the courage to risk your life for a people not your own?" She replied instantly: "Mother always told us that when you know something is wrong, you'll feel it here" – upon which she rammed her fists, hard, against her stomach – "and you must NEVER ignore that feeling."

Then her face lit up like a young girl's, and she added in a conspiratorial whisper: "*Und es war auch, natuerlich, ein Abenteuer . . .*"

*And it was also, of course . . . an adventure.*



Author Vivien Orbach-Smith (1998) on the balcony of the Orbach family's apartment on Griefswalder Strasse in Berlin, where her grandfather (killed in Sachsenhausen) was arrested in May of 1942; and her father and grandmother, eight months later, locked the Gestapo in the parlor and escaped out the back exit. Thus began their life underground.

Like teenagers throughout time, Lothar and his comrades lacked a full grasp of deadly consequences and were convinced they were invincible. This hearkens to my father's purpose in sharing his experiences with sometimes-discomfiting candor: his conviction that victims of war and displacement are too easily relegated to distant stick-figures defined solely by their wretched plights, making them "The Other" instead of *us*: humans driven by the same fantasies and foibles, the same ideals and yearnings.

What buoys me today is the knowledge that my father's life-story has touched minds and hearts, and my hope that it will keep doing its work long into the future. I'm gratified that the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, recognized Sylvia and her matriarchs as "Righteous Among the Nations," making their heroism an example for others. And how I treasure connections forged with far-flung individuals of all backgrounds, especially the young, who've found Lothar a kindred spirit.

*Like Kerstin Malka-Winter, who during a high-school fieldtrip in 1999 heard Larry Orbach speak in Berlin and was inspired by his "absence of bitterness" in the wake of an evil that would've engulfed her too, as a gay woman, had she lived under Hitler. She became active in youth-exchange programs with LGBT Israeli peers, and today is the librarian in Tel Aviv's Goethe-Institut.*

*Like Ulrike Boettcher, a design student renting the Orbachs' former flat on Greifswalder Strasse when Larry (on his final European journey, 2006) knocked on the door and stunned her with what had happened there during Nazi times.*

*Afterwards she accepted his invitation to "couchsurf" in his Manhattan flat – two Berliner pals on a last, great adventure.*

*Like my former student Komail Aijazuddin, a young Pakistani-Muslim painter/journalist so taken by Lothar's story, that in 2008 he presented me with a stunningly evocative portrait of him, edged in gold leaf, copied from the book-jacket photo.*

I salute them and others – including unknown readers proffering Facebook "likes" from Mosul, Qatar, Azerbaijan – for embracing the universality of Lothar's message and that we are all fellow travelers on the same vulnerable ship, in the same turbulent sea.

Yes, the Holocaust was a monstrous, singular event in human history, though neither the first genocide nor, tragically, the last. Few of us will ever undergo such horror. Yet in each life there are deep personal sorrows, trials that threaten to break us. In Lothar's chronicle of overcoming, we're promised that even in our darkest hour we can rise up, reinvent ourselves, seize joy – perhaps even heal the world.

– Vivien Orbach-Smith (2017)



Larry (Lothar) Orbach (in 2000) at the "Walk of the Righteous" in Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum/archive in Jerusalem, where his mother's rescuers are among those honored, thanks to his