

I've spent 15 years uncovering what happened to my family in Holocaust

This week marks 80 years since the liberation of Auschwitz. **Etan Smallman** recalls his journey to find out the fate of his Jewish family under the Nazis

I don't know when I first learnt of the Holocaust. But, in truth, I never really needed a class or book to teach me about the industrial shooting, gassing and incineration of the majority of European Jewry; I only needed to look around my own family.

On my father's side – his grandparents arrived in Britain from Poland and Lithuania around the turn of the 20th century – there are more cousins than I can count, and get-togethers are always boisterous and bustling affairs.

My mother's family could not be more different. Both her parents fled Berlin in the nick of time in 1939. Many of their closest loved ones, including several siblings, did not have such fortune. This means that, even two generations down the line, that half of my family is scant, its remnants scattered across the world. My grandfather had a solitary niece with him in London.

What of those who did not make it out? I have long felt a sense of shame that I did not at the very least have their names.

When I was growing up, the elderly relatives who had survived did largely feel able to speak about their experiences, but I don't remember much being said about the specifics of what happened to those we lost. Perhaps, pre-internet, they had never been able to find out. Or, maybe, amid a sea of suffering, and the need to rebuild lives anew in foreign countries, tracking down the details did not feel like a priority. The fact that all my grandparents died before I was born added an extra sense of distance.

On 27 January, the world will mark 80 years since the liberation of Auschwitz, the Nazi death camp

in Poland that is perhaps the closest man has ever come to creating hell on earth. More than 1.1 million people were killed there, including almost one million Jews.

When I visited the site, aged 21, I vowed that – after two decades of knowing little about my family history – I would put names to the gaps in my family tree. But it would be another decade and a half before I had the emotional and physical resources to do it.

Chief among the latter has been getting access to the records of the International Tracing Service (ITS), still reuniting survivors, refugees and their descendants eight decades after it was founded by the Allies as an official registration facility for millions of missing people.

The first person I am determined to investigate is not actually a blood relative at all. She was the first wife of my grandfather, Suesskind, whom he wed in Berlin in 1938, a swastika stamped on their marriage certifi-

cate. I knew she had been murdered – and that she would have no children to trace her story. But though I remember seeing their beautiful wedding photos as a child, I didn't even know her proper name. Only Suesskind's nickname for her, Cilly.

The only document I have that talks of my grandfather's extraordinary life in his own words is a three-page letter, typed in 1982 – 86 years after his birth and two years before his death.

"I was arrested three times by the Gestapo and beaten up," he says, "and was told one evening, you bloody Jew will be shot the next day at 10 o'clock in the morning."

It explains why within just six days of obtaining his *Fremdenpass* (alien's passport) from the Nazis, he was in Southampton. He planned for his new wife – with whom he'd enjoyed 10 months of married life – to join him. But only nine days after he left the exits out of Germany were sealed after Hitler invaded Poland

and triggered the Second World War. Suesskind tried, and was unable, to get her out.

In my research, I finally learnt her proper name – Zila, née Schaulsky – in a document from World Jewish Relief, the British overseas aid charity once known as the Central British Fund for German Jewry. It records my grandfather visiting Bloomsbury House in London begging for any information on where his wife had ended up.

The name allows me to apply for her record from the ITS. The 77 pages I get back unpack Suesskind's frantic search from the UK. None of his findings would be happy.

Within a year of her husband's escape, Zila was working in Berlin as one of 80,000 slave labourers for Siemens, which today is one of the largest industrial manufacturing companies in Europe.

On 19 October, 1941 – a month after being compelled to wear a yellow star – Zila was taken on one of the first transports from Berlin to the Lodz Ghetto in central Poland. Testimony records that SS guards, some with horse whips, supervised the loading of the human cargo on to trains. When she arrived, she worked as a seamstress, perhaps making uniforms for the German military. Overcrowding, starvation and squalor were the main features of life in the ghetto.

Then, at 7am on 8 May 1942, she was moved again, 30 miles north-west, on the 59th deportation from Lodz to Chelmino, the first station-ary facility where poison gas was used for the mass murder of Jews. Within hours of her arrival, Zila, aged 38 – the age I am now – along with every one of the 953 others on that train, were killed before being dumped in a mass grave.

Sixteen months after her murder, oblivious, my grandfather and her brother were still trying to help her, corresponding by telegram about any possibility of getting her to Switzerland.

It was not only his wife; my grandfather had other loved ones who were missing. His sister, Feigel Resche Eilberg, was recorded and even photographed – with her husband Eisig – for a Nazi-ordered registration of the Jewish inhabitants of Kraków in 1940, ahead of deportation to that city's ghetto. It is the only photo I have ever seen of my great-aunt.

From here, my search has so far gone cold, and I am yet to find conclusive evidence of Feigel's fate. In 1941, the Kraków Ghetto was set up in Podgórze – the district in which Feigel and Eisig had celebrated their wedding back in 1907 – and two years later, in 1943, 2,000 Jews in the ghetto were shot, 2,000 taken for forced labour and 3,000 deported to Auschwitz. Pogroms against the few



Main and right: documents about Etan Smallman's grandfather, Suesskind, seen with Zila on his wedding day; bottom right, Etan

survivors continued in Krakow even after the war, in 1945 and 1946.

Later, Suesskind would marry my grandmother, his second wife, Ilse. She, too, had losses to count. One of her brothers, Fritz, went to Palestine before making his life in the US. But I had no idea what happened to the other brother, Hans Manasse, until a search of the ITS records, with the invaluable help of Elise Bath, who manages the only UK "portal", at London's Wiener Holocaust Library.

It tells me that in July 1942, he was placed on a manhunt list by the police in Berlin. The next list he appears on is three months later – for deportation, alongside Rose Manasse, who the records suggest is his wife. They were marched into a ransacked synagogue in Berlin, then packed on to trains for three days.

According to one testimony, they were "herded together in the smallest space like dogs, and we were treated like them as well". One woman gave birth during the journey. En route, "the SS guards took the opportunity to shoot at us with their carbines".

When the couple arrived in Riga, Latvia, there is a small chance that my great-uncle was one of the 81 men sent for torturous labour. More likely, Hans and Rose were shot in the Rumbula or Bikernieki forests. Almost 1,000 souls were on that transport. Only 17 survived the war.

Eight decades later, these tragic conclusions are traumatic to uncover, if not a surprise. Sharing them with my family has been pain-

ful too, though all have been keen to know more.

What has been most upsetting has been computing how close these people were to me, despite how long-lost their stories once seemed. Some wee first cousins my mother never got to meet. They should have been providing the backdrop to my childhood. Instead, I have spent years trawling just to find evidence of their existence.

As incidents of anti-Jewish racism in the UK and elsewhere reach record highs, the ITS's 30 million documents, relating the experiences of 17.5 million people across 16 miles of shelving, are a gargantuan riposte to the Holocaust denial and distortion sweeping modern discourse. The deaths of all the relatives I have researched are a microcosm of a Europe-wide catalogue of brutality.

But it is important to remember that the tragedy that befell my forebears is nothing extraordinary. Statistically, we were the lucky ones. Two thirds of Europe's Jews were murdered; two thirds of my grandmother's generation in our family survived. And, while it all may seem like ancient history to some, 80 years on, the global Jewish population has still not recovered to pre-war levels.

"That the Nazis succeeded in physically destroying people is horrific enough," says Bath. "But when they've also destroyed all memory of them, that seems doubly wounding. There are no acts of rescue that we can perform. But what we can do is bring back people's names. And at least we can try and remember that people existed."

As the baton of memory is being passed on, the "third generation" is grappling with its bequest. Jesse Eisenberg, writer, director and star of *A Real Pain*, described as a "Holocaust buddy movie", said that for the Shoah's grandchildren, the silence and taboo of the second generation has lifted: "Younger people talk about it a lot more, with a more analytically removed perspective."

It may explain my drive to pursue this research. But there are some things talking cannot change. At Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Centre in Jerusalem, researchers have spent almost a century collecting the names of every murdered Jew, but there are well over a million condemned to anonymity. No descendants, no grave, no picture, no name.

This Holocaust Memorial Day, I will finally be able to light a candle for Zila, for Hans, for Rose, for Feigel and for Eisig.

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