

## *Running, juxtaposed.*

Becca Rausch

July 31, 2017

*Author's Introductory Note: This poetic prose reflects on my June 2017 trip to Augsburg, Germany, where my maternal grandfather was born and raised before the Holocaust. The visit was occasioned by the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Augsburg synagogue, the oldest still standing synagogue in all of Bavaria, the original construction of which my grandfather's family financed in large part. My mother, my sister, my sister's spouse, and I were four of 99 people who attended the multi-day celebration, all of us second and third generations of Jews descended from the Jewish people who lived in Augsburg before and at the start of the War, except one, who was himself a former Augsburg resident. I delivered this piece to the congregation at erev [Tisha B'Av](#) services at [Temple Aliyah](#) in Needham, MA, after which I made slight edits to the text. Readers may wish to learn more about the [synagogue](#), the associated [Jewish Culture Museum](#), and the 100<sup>th</sup> [anniversary celebration](#). Pictures from the 5-day event are available on the Museum's [Facebook page](#).*

***I run*** around the house preparing for my son's third birthday party. I spend the next several hours enjoying family, friends, and a ridiculous amount of cuteness, all of us having come together to celebrate the life of our first-born child—cupcakes and candles and singing and presents and laughter and joy.

***I run*** around packing. I think about my kids and my spouse and how much I will miss them while I am away. I think about how challenging this trip will be, particularly without my spouse by my side. I am thankful for FaceTime and the wonders of modern technology. I remember to throw in an extra rain poncho for my sister. I remember to throw in my laptop and a thumb drive containing a video of my grandfather, long since passed away, giving a speech about Kristallnacht, known to all as the Night of Broken Glass, and known to my family as the night before he was arrested – arrested because he was Jewish and he asked a police officer whether school was in session for his younger brother – and taken to Dachau.

***I run*** around getting the suitcase and the backpack and people into the car. Long hugs. Long kisses. A couple of tears as I embark on this life-changing journey. Security, airplane, customs, another airport. I attempt to watch the Kristallnacht speech my Opi gave, but the file will not load. I think about the incompatibility of Macs and PCs, of dreams and reality, of love and loss, of life and death.

***I run*** from the plane to the airport exit for the train station. I appreciate the fresh air, having not breathed any for at least a dozen hours. I appreciate the German folk music coming from a band playing on the other side of the plaza. I smile. And then, I'm crying, overwhelmed by the contrast of my seemingly commonplace travel and the true exceptionality of my journey. By the contrast of the extreme hate and inhuman treatment my family experienced and the undying love

my Opi had for this country, its people, and its culture... a love he had until the day he died. I figure out how to purchase tickets in German, get on board, settle into a seat, and look out the window. I am thankful for Justice Sotomayor's memoir, not because I'm reading it, but because again I'm crying, again overwhelmed by the beauty of this place and the realization that the very first thing I've done in Germany is to get on a train. The juxtaposition of my breath of fresh air and the last breaths of fresh air taken by so many who perished on German train rides slaps me across the face.

*I run* from the Augsburg train station to our hotel. I notice a big department store along the way called the C&A and think to myself, I should come back here to do a little shopping... maybe they have teeny tiny lederhosen for my kids. Little did I know, that very store is where my family used to live. Opi, his siblings, and their parents on the third floor, my great great grandparents, Hugo and Lina, for whom I am named, on the fourth floor, and commercial space on the first two floors. My family owned a building that filled nearly an entire city block. The whole thing was destroyed by a bomb during the War and later rebuilt. I bought my kids Tigger sunhats in what used to be Opi's house. Racks of men's suits now stand where Opi used to sleep. I cannot even envision this kind of wealth. I cannot envision losing this kind of wealth, reduced to selling your gold teeth to put food on the table.

*I run* into my mother's arms in the courtyard of the oldest still-standing synagogue in all of Bavaria, the temple my family helped to build, the shul the Nazis tried to burn to the ground. The first floor was destroyed before they had to extinguish the fire on account of the temple's centrality and the fuel repository across the street. The roof was blown off by a bomb. But the balcony where the women and children sat is original. Reinforced and refinished, but original. My mother directs me to sit in the aisle seat, second row, left side when facing the *bima*. Lina's seat. My namesake's seat. The matriarch of our family. I am grateful to my sister who had the wisdom to bring tissues. I am awe-struck by the juxtaposition of the splendor of this building and the absolute horrors of its history and its people. My mom sat here during the rededication in 1985 when torah scrolls were finally returned to their rightful place in the *aron kodesh*. My Opi sat here—this very spot—when he first returned as part of the allied forces, after Dachau, after emigration, after enlisting. This very seat.

I got to see the temple in May of 1945 when I returned to Augsburg as one of the first American soldiers to enter my own native town. You can very well imagine that this was another major event of my life, one so replete with a mixture of feelings that I find it impossible to this day to describe it. Suffice it to say that I got my licks in during three years of combat service culminating in the American occupation of Germany and of my native town. Then, one afternoon, I walked toward the temple which was, of course, in dreadful condition. I picked my way through broken glass on to the upstairs, and sought out my grandmother's seat still in place. And there I sat, with my carbine in one hand and my steel helmet in the other, and the memories of what had been a most happy childhood that had a bad ending overwhelming me. I looked up into what had once been magnificent stained glass windows now broken, and watched the pigeons fly in and out.

We—my mom, sister, sibling-in-law, and I—join dozens of other second- and third-generation descendants from the Jews of Augsburg, now spread out all over the world, for a set of speeches welcoming us to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the shul and I am most struck by the rabbi's words... that the synagogue is more about the people, past, present, and future, than it is about a building, that the 99 of us attending the celebration form something of a new *mishpacha*, that this experience is not just about death and destruction, but also about survival and renewal.

**I run** to catch up with the rest of our tour group after my mom, my cousins, and I walked through the still in tact bunker, now serving as something of a museum, complete with Nazi equipment, posted propaganda, and air sirens on audio loop. It's a beautiful, bright, sun-filled day, always overshadowed by the reason we are here. The other family on the tour hails from around the globe—from next door in Newton to Scotland to Israel to Australia. They descend from seven brothers, all of whom were murdered, but not before they were able to save their children through sponsorship from distant family members in safe countries (relatives they never really knew) and the *Kindertransport*. I venture off on my own for lunch and find myself sitting at an idyllic café, next to the river, surrounded by trees and flowers. I am eating a delicious salad, drinking delectable coffee, and—in an instant—my joy turns to sorrow. I'm crying, here at my table, alone with my thoughts, surrounded by people just going about their business, eating lunch, speaking a language I don't understand... but might have if not for Hitler. I am thankful for my dark sunglasses. I am grateful to be here, to see the place of my history, my heritage, my lineage. I feel connected, and also foreign. It is wonderful, and so incredibly challenging. I see what would have been, what could have been, and yet it's a whole world away. I am particularly grateful to be here as a parent; I know it changes everything. As I reflect on the story of my fellow tour-goers, I have no idea how they said goodbye to their children. I suppose good parents always find a way, but I cannot imagine or comprehend that kind of horror. And still, here they are, more than a dozen who made the trip and many more in their family tree. Life found a way.

**I run** for flowers. Just an hour before, I strolled through the *Stadtmarkt*, appreciating the vibrance of the fruit, vegetables, fish, and flowers. And now I run to buy some of those same flowers to place on a *Stolpersteine*, a commemorative plaque for my great great grandparents, mounted in front of their last address. I walk back to the C&A department store with the woman—exactly my age—who has spent the last portion of her career studying my family. There's a book about us in the museum attached to the synagogue. Earlier in the day she asked us how it felt to be here, what it means to us. I could not control the tears as I tried to respond. All I remember saying is that I hope I live up to my namesake. Her name is Souzana; I remember her name as part of a German folk song Opi taught me when I was young. I watch the workmen place the plaque on a lamppost outside the main entrance to the C&A. My mother and her first cousin place flowers on top. My family and I follow with more flowers, creating something of a game of Jenga, but with roses. A photographer, later learned to be a descendant of a Nazi officer, takes our picture. I examine the *Stolpersteine* more closely, reading Hugo's and Lina's names on the front, and a series of other names on the back. The additional names on the back confuse me. I do not recognize these names, except for those of my great aunt and uncle. My sister inquires and we learn that these are the names of the people who all committed suicide together the night

before they were scheduled to be transported. This is the place they died, and also the place they lived. I remember how Lina found a way to live on before she took her life, passing a tablecloth and some other treasures to a trusted friend to keep safe. That friend gave those treasures to her daughter, and that daughter kept the treasures for decades, hoping some day to pass them along to their rightful owner. That daughter found Opi and my mother in 1985 when they went back to Augsburg for the synagogue's rededication. My mom has Lina's tablecloth.

*I run* through one juxtaposition after another—dream and reality, love and loss, life and death, friendship and betrayal, fun and fear, respect and persecution, epic destruction and splendid rebirth. Up a mountain to a castle with a gorgeous music hall that never saw an actual concert. The family-owned inn where my family vacationed, with the oldest surviving member of the owner-family too young to have known Opi before the Holocaust, but who nonetheless knew his name the moment my mom introduced herself as Walter Sturm's daughter and welcomed us like his own kin, complete with champagne; he would not let us leave until we tasted his chicken soup, made from the chickens he farmed, and the custard made from the eggs.

I always wondered, marveled really, at how Opi managed to maintain such a love for his childhood home, in spite of everything that happened. *Eicha* says, "Gone is the joy of our hearts; Our dancing is turned into mourning." Lamentations, ch. 5, vs. 15. That was true for his sister, who never again set foot in Augsburg, but Opi overcame. Opi saw the good in a culture, a society, a people who woefully, mistakenly succumbed to an atrocious leader. I see it now. I revel in the juxtaposition. I embrace life's challenges in a new way. This journey allowed me to access lessons Opi taught me before I was old enough to learn them. To figure out how to rise above, to survive, to rebuild, to succeed, to recognize and appreciate the joys discovered along the way. Indeed, after the announcement of my talk tonight circulated, I learned from another congregant—someone already a friend of mine—that her family came from Augsburg too and, lo and behold, not only did her grandmother know my family, she had a crush on my grandfather for most of their childhood. Surprising joy, arising out of ash and despair. To replace hatred, bigotry, and venomous vitriol with compassion, meaningful conversation, love, and hope. After all, isn't that the point?

© Rebecca L. Rausch, August 1, 2017.