

Roots into the light

It was just a pastime in the beginning, now it is his profession. The Berlin based family researcher Marc Jarzebowski unveils family secrets, investigates legends. And sometimes it all comes full circle again.

Written by Verena Friederike Hasel

The three white candles have travelled far, 4400 kilometers, from Nowosibirsk to Berlin. It has also been a long way for the woman, who is now unwrapping the candles from a cloth. Julia Likhacheva has searched for her ancestors for almost all her life, and now, aged 77, she is standing on the cemetery of Berlin Cathedral in the district of Wedding, where her grandfather had been buried. Her daughter and her granddaughter have accompanied her on her journey into the past. She passes two of the candles to them and keeps the third one in her own hand.

Three candles, three generations at the gravesite of her ancestor. It is a kind of family reunion and a German-Russian story, which is told here. A story about the faultings of the 20th century, about prosecution, about loss and about the persistent search for the roots. Where do we come from? This question has been passed over from the old to the young in the Likhacheva family. The one, who has finally found the answers, is standing a little aside on this cold morning and is freezing in his thin jacket. Marc Jarzebowski is a family researcher, according to his business card - but for the three women he is much more than this. For them he is somebody, who brings together, what belongs together, even post mortem.

Family researchers are familiar with the lives of others, but about themselves hardly anything is known. Family researcher, this is a profession, for which no classes can be attended, no schoolbooks exist. Numbers about how many people in Germany carry out this profession, are lacking, too. But it's a perfect opening for conversations, as Marc Jarzebowski experiences regularly. As soon as he has mentioned his job on a party, people start to talk. About the old family bible, which they have found, about the granduncle, about whom the family has been puzzling for so long already.

Marc Jarzebowski, 44, has studied history, just like his father and grandfather. He worked at university for many years, and when his future started to shape in the form of a son, the desire to know about his own past started to grow. He researched his own family's history, and from this his business idea evolved: Why not offering this service to others? The idea for a suitable name for his enterprise came to him, when he walked his son in the pram through Sanssouci park and when he saw the strange trees there, whose roots don't just grow into

the earth, but also out of the earth into the air. His one-man-business is called "Taxodium" since then, in German: Bold cypress.

He has received about one hundred research requests since then, many from overseas. Some people hope they have a famous ancestor, just like the man called Mundz, who asked, if he might be related to the painter Edvard Munch. But it is mainly about family secrets and -legends. An American came forward the other day, for example. If it was true that his German ancestor had left his wife and had escaped towards America? Another one asked the historian for assistance, because he had inherited a seal ring and believed that an ancestor had been ennobled. The family tree, which Jarzebowski has compiled for him, contains about one hundred persons by now - the ring bearer is not yet among them. And Jarzebowski is looking for somebody, who had been a well known musician in Berlin during the 1920s - according to what is told in the family. But up to now he has only found him as an engine fitter in the contemporary Berlin directories. And then there is Willi Hentschke.

Photo albums are usually made by the parents about their children. One can see them grow and prosper from page to page, from the tooth gap and the school cornet with sweets at the school enrollment ceremony to the wedding gown. But Julia Likhacheva makes a photo album about her father, which has no happy ending. One of the first pictures shows a man and a woman in a birch wood, sitting back to back but with their heads turned to each other. Certainly no comfortable position, but a necessary one for people so much in love with one another that looking at each other is inevitable.

The next page shows the man again, with a white shirt, polished shoes, in festive clothing and with a festive expression, proudly lifting the reason for this. A small bundle of life in a white blanket. On the last photo of the album the man is alone. His shirt no more white, his hair unmade. This picture of Willi Hentschke was taken shortly before he was murdered in a camp.

"My father", Julia Likhacheva says, "came from fire into flames", in German: "Out of the frying pan into the fire" (literally the German saying means: from the rain into the eaves). And politically: from Nazi Germany to Stalinist Russia.

Julia Likhacheva grew up alone with her mother Elena, first in Moscow, later in Siberia. She only knew few benchmark data about her father for years: Willi Hentschke, German communist, fled from the Nazis to Russia in 1934. Worked in a chemical factory, met Elena, walked with her through birch woods and married her. Always had a cloth with him to polish his shoes, loved poetry, Heinrich Heine especially, and died far too early. It was not until long time later that the girl learned about what had happened. In summer 1937, Julia had just been born, there was a knocking at the door. Uniformed men stood in the corridor. Words like "German spy" and "public enemy" were dropped and Hentschke was led away. Historians later named this period the "Great Terror" - millions of people were picked up by the Stalinists and killed. But Elena Likhacheva didn't lament, but sang her daughter German songs. After Stalin's

death she started the search for the one, who had made her familiar with them. At the end of 1956 she received a response from the authorities, which her daughter has now brought with her to Berlin more than half a century later. It is a flimsy paper with a clear purple handwriting, as if this was an entry for an autograph book. Willi Hentschke, date of death: 31. Sept. 1956, cause of death: gastric ulcer. Another mail came a few weeks later, the second flimsy sheet, with the note that there had been an error concerning the date, which was actually Sept 30th. Cause of death was still the same: gastric ulcer.

Would one believe people a single word, who initially indicate a death date, which is known by no calendar?

Elena Likhacheva, however, didn't give up her search for truth. When she died in 1991, her daughter Julia stepped in and asked the question again in the KGB office, which had already troubled her mother: What had happened to Willi Hentschke?

Months later Julia Likhacheva received the third flimsy note, this time with a new date and cause of death. Died 3. Nov. 1937. By shooting. In Butovo near Moscow. This had been one of Stalin's execution centers. 230 people were killed there on the very day, when Willi Hentschke died.

Finally Julia Likhacheva knew the truth. "But a hole in my heart", she says, "did still remain." She filled up the hole with poetry, just like her father, she discovered the Russian German poet Günter Türk, who had been incarcerated under Stalin, and she published his work. Türk's biography corresponds to her father's one, with one difference: Türk survived. "Accepting, without unscrewing the head, trying vinegar, without mumbling", one of the poems reads. "Perhaps", Julia Likhacheva says "my father would have felt similar".

A few years ago her daughter continued the search. She lives in London with her husband, and whenever watching the tv program "Who do you think you are?", in which British celebrities are looking for their ancestors, she thought about her grandfather. Two years ago she accompanied her husband to a conference at Potsdam. She arranged a meeting with Marc Jarzebowski, shortly before her journey back home. In a pizzeria near Tegel airport she passed to him what she had: Three death certificates and one question: "We finally know, how Willi Hentschke's life ended. But where did it start?"

Jarzebowski went to his work place to find an answer, which consists of all archives and libraries in this city. He meets about a dozen of people again and again, who sit for hours with books and microfilm readers, and he assume they are colleagues. One nods to one another respectfully, but doesn't speak. An archive demands other conventions than a canteen kitchen. But there are some, who run faster and work with more hectic, lacking the adequate dignity taught by a year long dealing with the past. Probably heir hunters, Jarzebowski says, who are looking for heirs on the basis of public notifications in gazettes, working at their own expense, until they find somebody they can charge.

Jarzebowski never works this way, he requires an appointment, with an hourly

rate between Euro 55 and 65. The business is going well. The more extended family bands dissolve, the less people know about their kinship. And, Jarzebowski says, Berlin is a good base, because of its many archives, even the ministry of foreign affairs has one. And also because Berlin is the place, where the lives of so many people began, who had to flee later. For example from the Nazis, just like Willi Hentschke.

Jarzebowski checked old directories in the Central and Regional Library to trace him. He found Burgsdorffstraße 1 in the district of Wedding as a possible address. He asked in the responsible civil registration office of Berlin-Mitte for a birth record of a Willi Hentschke. He received a positive response after months, which enabled him to look for the marriage record of Willi's parents in the Berlin State Archive. And he received information about professions, birth and death dates from the historical population register. He asked parish churches and park departments in all Berlin districts about ecclesiastical and communal cemeteries to find out, on which cemetery Julia Likhacheva's grandfather Ernst Robert Hentschke had been buried, until the Cathedral parish administration got back to him. They had the name Ernst Robert Hentschke in their papers, but the precise location of the grave was not documented.

And this is why Julia Likhacheva stands on the cemetery, after she has been to her father's house of birth the previous day. She had been a bit frightened, she says, not knowing what would expect her. A shabby house, perhaps, indicators of difficult circumstances. The happier she was, when she saw Burgsdorffstrasse 1. The house is deteriorated and scaffolded, but the generous Wilhelminian style building can still be seen. Julia Likhacheva was even more happy, when she strolled around the streets nearby. Many old houses are still standing, and thus she saw the facades, which her father had seen almost a century earlier. Anyway, Julia Likhacheva has the feeling that Berlin wants to welcome here. A tiny birch grows on the very top of the roof of Burgsdorffstrasse 1. Very much like on the photo, on which her father had been so happy.

Photo description:

Arrived. Julia Likhacheva, 77, has been asking questions about her ancestors for all her life. The historian Marc Jarzebowski was able to answer them. This search directed grandmother, daughter and granddaughter from Siberia to the Cathedral cemetery in Berlin-Wedding.

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