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Lessons from My European Travels: Love, Hate, and the Fate of Humanity

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Abstract

I once met a man who was a dead-ringer for Joseph Goebbels. He had the same dour sort of face plastered to a gaunt skull that could only have been squeezed in a vice; the same thin hairline that had retreated in step with the Reich's exhausted armies; the same curt manner that summed itself up in a curled finger—"come here." Our introduction to each other began with a beep from an airport scanner in Frankfurt. With no words, he directed me to an isolation space behind the security station. I'd be a liar if I said that standing with my arms outstretched as he patted me all over with gloved hands and chemical swabs didn't send my heart racing. I didn't know what to expect.

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

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ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

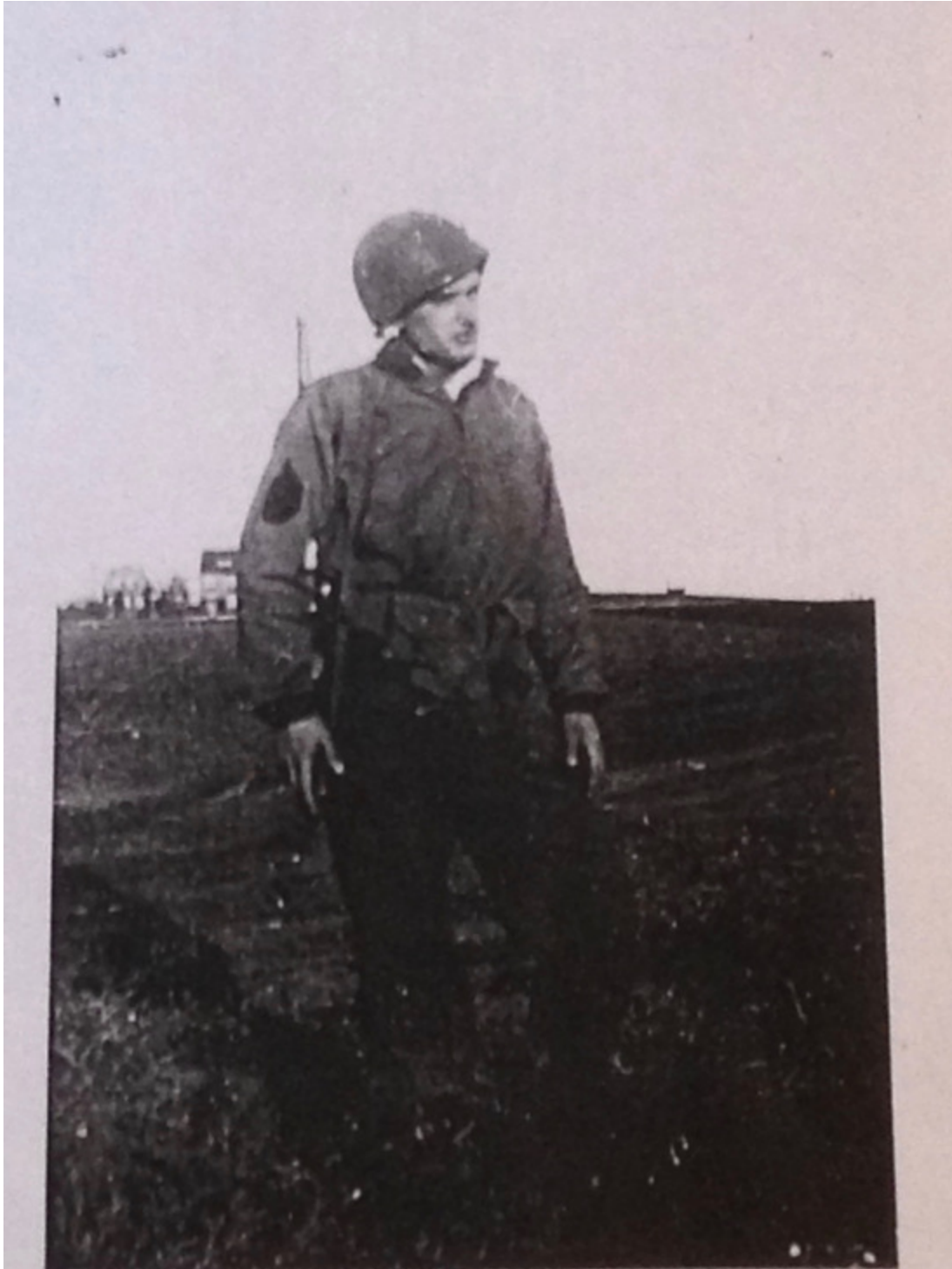
Lessons from My European Travels: Love, Hate, and the Fate of Humanity

By *Matt LaRoche '17*

I once met a man who was a dead-ringer for Joseph Goebbels. He had the same dour sort of face plastered to a gaunt skull that could only have been squeezed in a vice; the same thin hairline that had retreated in step with the Reich's exhausted armies; the same curt manner that summed itself up in a curled finger—"come here." Our introduction to each other began with a beep from an airport scanner in Frankfurt. With no words, he directed me to an isolation space behind the security station. I'd be a liar if I said that standing with my arms outstretched as he patted me all over with gloved hands and chemical swabs didn't send my heart racing. I didn't know what to expect.

But more than that, I was on my guard. This was my first time in Germany—a connecting flight to elsewhere. All I knew of Germany and its people was what my grandfather's stories and the History Channel had accidentally made instinctual to me: they were the enemy. There was something of a reckoning in that moment. It seemed that history had left me with only one response to an nationality: suspicion.

My grandfather rode with the 2nd Armored Division from Normandy to the Rhine. At the age of thirteen, his future wife led her siblings to shelter under the stairs as the Luftwaffe bombed targets across Somerset, night after night. Her aunt lost a thirteen-month old daughter in the London Blitz. Her uncle served with the BEF in France, and, after his capture in Greece, he spent five years as a slave laborer in a Bavarian salt mine. A generation earlier, my family sent almost a dozen men to fight above and below the trenches of the First World War. While—miraculously—not one died in combat, my great-great-grandfather, a sapper at Ypres, wheezed with the effects of mustard gas for the rest of his life.



Sgt. Gerard LaRoche, 2nd Armored Division, in Holland, 1944. Photo courtesy of the author.

But this was not the Kaiserreich, nor was it the Third Reich. This was Germany, 2016. I lived in the most globally connected and mutually supportive world ever seen. I had nothing to fear. But in those first few moments of vulnerability I could not help but respond with what I knew, and all I really knew were the bad things.

As I gathered up my belongings and threaded my belt around my waist, I felt ashamed, but I also grasped a historical truism that I doubt any book, talk, or documentary can satisfactorily convey: just how hard sectional hatreds die, and just how horrifying a thought that is. That fact of life is something that must, I think, be lived if it is to be combated, and, in the name of good history and better humans, it must be combated.

As soon as I understood this personally, I found myself thinking back to the aftermath of the Civil War and how people of all backgrounds fought, pleaded, and cut deals to propagate the nation's dividing lines as best suited their agendas. In a time and place where a trip from New York to North Carolina promised as alien an experience as flying from Baltimore to Berlin does today, it comes as no surprise that even as the war passed out of living memory, the survivors' sons and daughters often aided and abetted the divisions of the past. Their most visible efforts are still with us today: groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Sons of Confederate Veterans, etc. Even more numerous are the veiled ticks, terrors, and assumptions of the worst that our ancestors seeded in us. Bad blood that we either learn to avoid or that we turn to fodder for our own righteous indignation.

The reason we inherit hatred is simple: fear of the unknown, couched in assumptions of the worst. Limited experience with a subject means that any information one has at hand weighs, by default, more heavily on their decisions. When a family from the South migrated to, say, Detroit, so that the father might work on an assembly line, chances were good that they might assess their Northern neighbors by the lowest common denominator between them: perhaps the devastation of Sherman's March to the Sea. In that instance, North and South suddenly find a kind of common ground. Both sides have a claim to truth, though that truth hinges on handed-down accounts of lived experiences: incomplete, mistranslated, and usually one-sided.



The author as a child. Photo courtesy of the author.

Sadly, we still suffer from this all-too-human tendency to jump at the shadows of the past, to let our nightmares fill in the gaps in our knowledge. Too often in recent years we have found ourselves lead around by the nose, ceaselessly rounding a circle of blood and woe that stops us from believing that people can ever make peace and mean it. But we must remember that people can change. Eighty million Germans did; my grandfather got to see that change before he died. He traveled a Europe at peace, wearing a suit in place of his uniform. He carried a canvas instead of a carbine. And he was glad of it. He never once spoke ill of his former enemies to me. He knew all too well the horrors he witnessed, and, I sense, that because of that sad knowledge, he knew that such horror must be consigned to history, even if that meant him placing an immense amount of faith in strangers.

That's not to say it was easy—it never is. My grandfather suffered mentally from his war experiences to the very end. But he let go of his hate. He knew that humans need not live their lives as slaves to precedent. We, as a society, can cast off the crutch of hate's surety. But only if we recognize what the Czech writer Karel Čapek realized as he struggled to find hope in the grieving world that emerged from the Great War: "The world will be an evil place so long as people don't believe in people."

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