

INGRID'S ASHES

“I brought Ingrid,” Amanda says as she strolls sturdy and resolute toward me into the arrivals hall of the Munich Airport. We recognize each other from exchanged photos. She is middle-aged, wears black tights and a crisp white linen jacket. From habit I glance around to look for Ingrid, even though I know she’s dead.

“She’s in my satchel,” and lifts it up a bit, “in a canister.” Ashes don’t take up much space and the lady had been pretty small. Ingrid was Amanda’s grandmother and had raised her 3 year old granddaughter after Amanda’s parents had been killed. Ingrid had been a regular client of mine in the early 2000s but had died 4 years earlier. She had been petite, with perfect hair and tailored clothing, and always wore high heels to make herself five feet tall. I knew she’d been born in Munich in 1927, had adored her granddaughter Amanda, her American husband Max, and had liked her life in the US. She never spoke about her youth in Munich during WWII. I had asked her once about it but she’d said it was too long ago and had put it behind her.

I grab the handle of Amanda’s rollaboard, her only other luggage besides the satchel, and we walk into the sunshine toward the line of taxis to go into the city. She’d found my contact information in Ingrid's telephone log and had hired me for my three free days between jobs. She might need help with translations and officials, she’d told me. That would be the easy part. I’m not expecting the hard part but it hits like thunder.

“Did you know my Grandma Ingrid had been a guard at Dachau?” she says after we slide into the backseat of a taxi. Her voice is even and strong, almost official.

“Pardon,” I say, sure I’ve misheard. “A guard at Dachau Concentration Camp? Ingrid?” I shook my head. It was inconceivable. The woman had been the Emily Post of courtesy and charm. Nothing about her fit with working for the Nazis at the brutal camp near Munich. It was impossible and I say as much.

“I know, I felt the same way. Love makes you blind to faults.” She says. “She had been my mom, my world, my rock.” she says and shifts uncomfortably in her seat. “Ingrid loved me as her own. I adored her. But what I read and what she told me, ruined all that.” Spreading Ingrid’s ashes, I realize, is not the real reason Amanda has come. She needs to find out if her worst fear is real, that her beloved grandma had been a brutal, Nazi death camp guard. Behind the calm voice, there is a quiver. Everyone has an emotional Achilles heel. Ingrid is Amanda’s.

When her grandma became too forgetful to live alone, Amanda moved her to a care facility and cleaned out the family home. In a trunk, she found torn pages from Ingrid’s old diary and Amanda had the readable parts translated. She hands me one smeared, torn sheet written shortly after the war.

“Sep.....945. It was so hot, it was hard to breathe. Our uniform material was scratchy and thick but we had to wear it always, to show our status, our level. My cap was too big but that was ok because I could put it over my face. The prisoners stunk. They and.....were repellent. My assignment was not diffi..... but it was boring and the prier.....hated.....me. One officer taught me how to handle..... the prisoners.....in the ovens and.....but I never had to.....

Every fe days one tried to clim.... over the fence. Maybe to escap... or to commit suic..... The fence was electri..... so they died. Once or twic.. I had to help put bodi.... on carts when the male.....and prisoners wer...bus... . The bodies were burn.....Most of the

prisone.....” but the rest of the sheet is ripped off. I read it again before I hand it back to Amanda. Too many words are smeared for me to be sure about anything.

“Did you ask Ingrid about this, about Dachau, and working there?”

She nods her head. “Yes, she said it was true. She was at Dachau. She worked there. And she said it was her diary. The way she writes about the uniform, the status it showed, the prisoners hating her, all mean she was a guard. It breaks my heart.” Amanda closes her eyes. Tears roll down her face and splash on the satchel. “I asked her so often about those years but she acted like she didn’t hear me. I wondered then but now I’m sure of the worst.” The driver, glancing into the mirror, asks if everything is ok and I tell him, yes, not to worry. “Can you imagine what a shock it was to discover that someone I loved so much had been a criminal, a murderer? ” she whispers.

Yes, I could.

When I was young I was very close to Uncle Heinrich, a cheerful, caring guy, always dependable, always there for me. One day at lunch in Donisl, his favorite restaurant, he told me something that darkened our relationship until he died.

Heinrich had been a 21 year old engineer for a large German firm in 1933. He and a handful of other young men were told to design a summer boys campground and were sent onsite. The location was to be a secret. On the hours-long drive they were blindfolded, he said. During their month-long stay, they planned sleeping barracks, offices, kitchens and latrines. Only after the war did he find out he had helped build Dachau. I never asked for details, never tried to find out if he had told me the truth, never visited his grave.

“Look,” I tell her. “I know what she wrote seems damning but too many words are smeared to be sure. And she never actually admits she was a guard. Let’s see if any records exist, ok?” But it wasn’t ok. Amanda had lived with these fears for years and had convinced herself of the worst.

“Besides, Dachau was a camp for men, not women.” I tell her. “I doubt there would have been female guards.” But I sound more convinced than I feel. She stares forward at nothing, saying nothing.

The flat green fields flashing past begin to sprout trees as we enter the Munich suburbs. “I’m scared,” she says suddenly. “I’m scared I’ll find out she really was a Heil-Hitlering guard, but I can’t live with not knowing for sure. Better to know, straight up.”

“Amanda,” I say. “You told me Ingrid’s memory was shaky when you asked her about the diary page. She never admitted to anything, just that she had worked at the camp. We’ll find the records, I’m sure.” She nods.

”Do you know where she wanted her ashes?” I ask.

”No, she just said in the city. There’s a family plot where her father is buried. Grandpa Max told me that her father threw Ingrid out of the house in April, 1945 but he didn’t know the details. I won’t put the ashes there.” This was new. What had Ingrid done to be banished from the house, I wondered? With her and Max gone, I knew we’d never find out. Until we did.

“Max told me that Ingrid’s father Alfred was a committed Nazi,” Amanda says, after we arrive at the hotel. “A high up, a VIP, like a lieutenant colonel or something like that. He hanged himself in the summer of 1945, to avoid the trials at Nuremberg.” Alfred must have been an Obersturmbahnführer, I think, important indeed.

“He should’ve been proud of Ingrid if she became a guard at Dachau but he tossed her out of the house. I think she was only 17 when that happened.” Amanda’s eyes flit around the lobby trying to avoid what she wants to say. “Can we get to the records at Dachau?” She almost chokes on the sentence. I tell her I’ll arrange it for tomorrow.

On the train to Dachau, Amanda draws some black-and-white photos out of her purse. In one, Alfred is in his Nazi uniform, medals streaming across his chest, standing straight and stern, trying to look like a hero. Her mother, Ilse, and brother, Paul, near him, are ignored. Ingrid is almost in the background and off to the left. She is about 14 and the only one frowning.

“Alfred looks like he’s just caught a whiff of something rotten, doesn’t he?” Amanda says. In fact, that is exactly the expression, superior and haughty, practiced. In another photograph Max and Ingrid are in formal clothes, laughing, she, with a bouquet of flowers, he, immensely tall, towering over her. On the back is written, “1946.”

“This is their wedding day, at a chapel in Munich.” It’s the Leopold Church just north of downtown. Ingrid had told me that even at 19 she knew Max was the man of her dreams. They would have stayed in their beloved Munich but, soon after they were married, the Air Force transferred him back to the States.

“Here is Ingrid with her three best friends. The names are on the back.” She turns the paper over. In neat letters are printed “Ingrid Schmidt, Anna Goldberg, Hilda Gaertner, and Eve Steinmann.” The four girls cluster in the middle of the photo, hugging one another, laughing, so full of life. They’re all 14 or 15. The war had started a couple years before and food and fuel rationing had already begun. But these four were young and vibrant and had each other. I stare at the photo and realize Ingrid was as lovely at 90 as she had been at 14.

At Dachau, we have a half hour before our appointment at the records office. Amanda is resolute and calm; she's accepted the truth and will learn to cope with it, somehow. She walks around the memorial sculpture of wrought iron, line figures entwined in agony, and out toward a reconstructed barrack. I find a bench near the old office building and wait.

From the bench, most of the vast acreage of Dachau is visible, from the squat central offices, past the endless rectangles where countless barracks stood, to the barbed wire fences. For the hundredth time I imagine what it must have been like in 1943, during the worst of the crowding and disease. At 5am the dead bodies were collected from the barracks, sometimes hundreds of them, and taken to the crematoria at the back of the camp. There were too many to bury and the rotting corpses might have polluted the groundwater. The clearly dead were thrown without ceremony into the yawning ovens and burned, and the ashes spread thick over the nearby fields. The almost dead were hanged from the rafters and then shoveled into the ovens. I imagine the gasping stench of desolation, those who had given up and were already dead but didn't know it. Their ground was gray, the sky was gray, the barracks were gray, and the people were transparent, ashes, floating across the camp, gray, like smog..

Thousands upon thousands had died of typhoid, typhus, diphtheria, pneumonia, and heartbreak, day in, day out, year after year. Sometimes the greasy, yellowish smoke from the tall smokestacks drifted over Munich and left powdery dust on autos and sidewalks, street cars and store windows. No one spoke of it, afraid if they did, they themselves would become ash. The hand on my shoulder jerks me out of my thoughts. She tells me it's time to go to the records office.

The office is at the end of a long display hall and we walk past poster-sized photos of humans being tortured. Slasher movies are tame by comparison. Beside them are maps showing the expansion of the Nazi Empire as it spread over Europe like blood on water.

Something catches Amanda's eye. She breaks away from me and moves to one large poster. She gazes at it a moment or two. Then suddenly she shivers and her whole body transforms from solid to liquid, trembling violently, one outstretched hand touching the photo, the other covering her mouth. In the second it takes me to join her, she is near collapse, sobbing openly, strength gone, her face a mask of grief and horror.

In the photo is a young girl in striped pajamas, the uniform of the Dachau Concentration Camp inmates. She is hollowed out, gaunt, corpse-like. She holds a soldier's boot and is cleaning it. A young man stands over her, smug, haughty, one hand with a horse whip raised above her. I stare at the face.

Ingrid.

As awful as she looks, I recognize the young girl from the photo with her three friends, but now she's mostly bone and eye sockets. She had worked in Dachau, but as an inmate. The smeared words had concealed the truth.

I turn away and help Amanda to the nearest bench where she weeps behind her hands, muttering words I can't make out, rocking in her grief, her worst fears replaced by even more terrible ones. Two docents scurry over to help. "My Grandma..." Amanda wails to them and points toward the poster, "my Oma! She's.....she's the..... one in..... the photo!" She gasps between sobs. A glass of water and a box of tissues

appear. I wonder how many times victims have been recognized here and families reduced to emotional wreckage.

“It was so shocking,” she wheezes, “so unexpected. I’m sorry.” she says. I tell her to not apologize. “I just knew she’d been a guard, a Nazi. That the woman I loved had been a criminal, a murderer,” she says. “I was afraid it was true but I was ready for it. But this.....not this.” she says as she shakes, trying to stop the sobs. “I feel like I’ve been hit by a bus.” Emotional whiplash, I think. She bows her head, and in almost a prayer, chants, “Oma, oh Oma, I’m so sorry. So sorry. I was so wrong.”

The records office is cool and gleaming white, the receptionist pleasant and official. We’re led to a cubicle with a monitor and keyboard. I type in the name and wait. Amanda’s face is streaked with tears, her makeup gone, and her clothes disheveled. A moment later, a record pops up.:

“Name: Ingrid Bayer Schmidt. BORN 14 July 1927. Incarceration at Dachau: 03 May 1943, AGE 15. CRIME concealed Anna Goldstein, Jew, at the Schmidt residence. SOURCE OF INFORMATION: Paul Schmidt. LENGTH OF TIME IN DACHAU: 77 days. WORK DETAIL: cleaner. TRANSFERRED 19 July 1943 to Women’s Camp Ravensbrück. RELEASED FROM RAVENSBRÜCK: 22 April 1945.”

Amanda sits, gazing at the screen. “She hid her Jewish friend Anna Goldberg in her home. That was her crime. That would have been a humiliation for a Nazi family. And her brother turned her in. No wonder she never went home again.” The tears ran silently and dropped in big splotches on the desk, no gasps, no sobs. She doesn’t wipe them away. “All that time I thought she was a Nazi guard, that she had helped to murder inmates. Why didn’t she tell me?” I knew why. To share trauma is to relive it. That was too much for Ingrid. “I’m so ashamed.”

“Amanda, let it go. She never knew what you thought.”

"But I know. That I even suspected. What forgiveness...." and she trailed off.

"I read something from Dostoevsky or Dickens one time," I tell her, "something like, the dead can't absolve the living. Forgiveness only comes from within. That's what you'll do tomorrow. Tomorrow we'll carry out her last wish with the ashes. That's when you forgive yourself." I say. "I know the perfect place."

The curving, old creaky wooden stairs up to the balcony in St Peter's Tower are dark and cramped but we come out into the open air and gaze down on Marienplatz and the City Hall. A sea of red tiled roofs reaches to the horizon. A stiff breeze comes out of the south as we face north and open the canister. The first fistful of ash seems reluctant to leave our hands. Then with a burst, it puffs into the wind, flying up and sparkling across the city, twinkling like so many stars. Handful after handful until the last of it is gone and Amanda and I are smiling, cheering Ingrid into eternity. Amanda sighs with relief. The healing has started. I wish I had had a similar moment with Uncle Heinrich.

We climb down and when we reach the street Amanda turns to me.

"Is it too early for a schnapps?" she asks. I remind her we're in Bavaria where it's never too early for schnapps. I lead her across the plaza to the Donisl tavern, where, 50 years before, Uncle Heinrich had told me he'd worked on Dachau. I had let it trouble me ever since.

Now, as I order two double schnapps, I wonder if what he told me was the truth, that I had been wrong to blame him, as Amanda had been wrong. I lift my glass and realize it's time to let go.

"Here's to Ingrid," Amanda says, as we clink our glasses. And here's to Uncle Heinrich.

