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Shoah's Shadow

Wolf Brühl's Journey Through a World at War

Abstract

For most of my life, all I knew about my great-grandfather, Wolf Brühl, was that he had perished in Auschwitz. Determined to uncover his story, I retraced his journey – from his birthplace in Jarosław, Galicia, to Graz, Austria, where he built a life and a family before the Nazis made it impossible for them to stay. He fled across borders, slipping through Austria, Yugoslavia, and Italy, finally reaching Lyon, France, where he sought papers to rescue his wife and children. But in February 1943, he was captured in the Rue Sainte-Catherine roundup, sent to Drancy, and then deported to Auschwitz, where he was murdered. Yet, Wolf's story does not end with his death. His wife and children survived, and his youngest son, my grandfather Kurt, later became a leader in the Jewish community of Austria, rebuilding the synagogue in Graz that had been destroyed on Kristallnacht. In 2024, I stood inside that synagogue, placed a stone on Wolf's memorial, and said Kaddish for him. In traveling his path, I pieced together fragments of a life nearly erased. His story is just one among six million, but telling it is an act of remembrance – and a way to keep my great-grandfather's legacy of courage alive.

For most of my life, the only thing I knew about my great-grandfather, Wolf Brühl, was that he perished at Auschwitz. Talking to my relatives didn't reveal much – Wolf's son Kurt, my grandfather, died in 2014 when I was just six, and though we loved each other very much, most of his experiences in the Holocaust were too painful for him to recount to his own children, let alone a young grandchild. My mom and her sisters, though encouraging, were able to tell me only that their grandfather had been an Austrian small merchant who'd fled from Graz, Austria, to Lyon, France – where he was captured by Klaus Barbie in the Rue Sainte-Catherine Roundup while attempting to secure papers for himself and his family.

Part of my curiosity about Wolf was a desire to know where my family had come from and, by extension, where I came from. I wanted to try to understand why Wolf had died, and how his children had survived. To add to my rudimentary picture, I turned to online archives. Though many vital records and population registers were lost due to war damage or purposefully destroyed by the Nazis, I did find early traces of my great-grandfather and his family. Somehow, seeing his name in the digitally captured, flowing *Kurrent* cursive of a long-forgotten Austrian clerk, made him just a little bit more real.

Internet searches suggested that Wolf was born in Jarosław, Poland. Even that simple fact was slippery, though, since Poland didn't exist on the map of Europe in 1880, the year of his birth (I was about to become very familiar with "slippery" facts and incomplete pictures). I learned that Jarosław was then found within the Kingdom of Galicia and Lodomeria, a Habsburg "crownland" within the Austria-Hungary dual monarchy. When I couldn't find much more information online, I emailed the *Żydowski Instytut Historyczny* (Jewish Institute of History) in Warsaw to ask for help. A kind researcher responded to my queries, offering up digitised vital records from late-nineteenth century Jarosław.

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Then the trail went cold – just as my desire to learn all I could about Wolf was growing into a kind of obsession. I decided to travel to Poland myself, to meet with local historians and genealogists to try to trace Wolf's path and save more of his story. I spent last summer following that path, from Poland, to Austria, to Lyon, France. I visited the street where he was captured. I visited Auschwitz. Later, I visited the Jewish community in Graz that Wolf's son, my grandfather, helped rebuild after the Shoah. This is the story of that journey, my great-grandfather's and my own, following in his footsteps.

My first stop was Jarosław, today a sleepy city of 35,000 inhabitants – none of them Jewish – in southeastern Poland, about thirty miles from the Ukrainian border. I'd arranged to meet up with Jerzy Cechowicz, a local historian and my tour guide in both Jarosław and Kruhel Pawłosiowski, Wolf's actual village. Cechowicz was a squat Polish man in his early seventies, with patchy gray hair and intense blue eyes. He spoke only Polish, but he spoke it so quietly that even my translator struggled to understand him. Nevertheless, he managed to convey his passion with huge gesticulations and flashing eyes as he pointed out all-but-vanished traces of the once-rich Jewish life in Jarosław. Thanks to Jerzy, I was able to visualise what my great-grandfather's childhood might have looked like.

Kruhel Pawłosiowski, now on the outskirts of Jarosław, was a separate place in the 19th century. Cechowicz shared with me the entry from a Polish chronicle from 1886 indicating that the village was home to 138 men and 127 women, among them "172 rzym.-kat. [Roman Catholics], 78 gr.-kat. [Uniate Catholics], i 15 izrael. ['Israelites,' or Jews]". Just six years old then, Wolf would have been one of the fifteen Jews.

Although no prewar dwellings still stand in the shtetl, Jerzy showed me an old photograph of a representative Pawłosiowski cottage, a simple structure of white walls, a peaked thatch roof, and – surprising to me – windows of real glass. Fixing me with his intense stare, Jerzy suggested that Wolf could have been looking out at the world through those windows at the time of the photograph.

Cottage in Jarosław.
Courtesy of Jerzy Cechowicz.

A short walk into the woods lay the Jewish graveyard, though it was difficult at first to make out any grave markers among the trunks and groundcover. Clouds of giant mosquitos dived at any patch of exposed skin. Jerzy gestured at the murky forest around us, assured us that this was the place. The matzevot that once marked the graves of Jarosław's Jews, including my ancestors', had been taken by the Nazis, ground up, and used to lay roads and build walls. Only about a dozen of the tombstones remained. There was no way of knowing who rested where.

After leaving the ravaged Pawłosiowski graveyard, Jerzy guided me to the Stanisław Wyspiański Art School on Jarosław's Bóżnic Square, housed in the remodeled remnant of the Large Synagogue. The Large Synagogue was built between 1807–1811 on the probable site of a previous, sixteenth-century synagogue. The memorial tablet by the entrance dates from 2012 and was the first commemoration of the more than 10,000 Jarosław-area Jews who perished in the Holocaust. The size of the building, too, with its three stories, attests to the vibrant prewar population. Jerzy assured me that if Wolf was practicing Judaism at all, he would have crossed the threshold of the Large Synagogue at some point. During the war, the Germans burnt the synagogue, but the walls survived, and the Polish government rebuilt it for various purposes until it reached its current iteration as the art school.

The commemorative plaque outside of the old Large Synagogue of Jarosław.
© Noah Saphier.

Next to the Large Synagogue stands the Small Synagogue, which the community used for more intimate ceremonies. Although Wolf may or may not have attended these, he would have passed the shul regularly. The building is now run down and out of use, but a testament to its Jewish history persists in a carved relief of the Ten Commandments in its façade.

From behind the two synagogues, the spire of the Collegiate Church of Corpus Christi rises over the line of shops across the street. Built in the years 1580–1594, the church's proximity to the two Jewish houses of worship suggests the relative cultural tolerance of early modern Jarosław. By contrast, in Warsaw and elsewhere, Jews confined themselves to limited sections of cities even before ghettoization. I was pleased to imagine my great-grandfather growing up in an accepting environment – on the other hand, such tolerance must have made the social and political crises that preceded the Holocaust an even greater shock.

Jerzy walked a few steps further, pointing out a large square outline comprised of stones jutting partially from the ground. We were standing on top of vanished Jewish buildings. Without Jerzy's photos, I would have never known. I tried to imagine Wolf's relatives or friends living in the buildings. Maybe my grandfather enjoyed a meal there or played hide and seek with other Jewish kids.

We strolled along the block past bustling shops and eateries. Jerzy showed me more documents from prewar Jarosław, and I noted that many of the store names contained the surnames of Jewish merchants. We visited other remnants that were previously centers of Jewish life and learning, such as the mikveh, the ritual bath, and the yeshiva, a school for learning the Jewish scriptures from ages two to thirteen. Jerzy related that in the 1920s, after Wolf left Jarosław, with a typhus epidemic ravaging Poland, the Jewish community allowed non-Jewish residents to use the mikveh for sanitary purposes. This anecdote gave me a greater sense of the cultural diversity of Jarosław and the environment in which my great-grandfather grew up.

The Old Synagogue of Jarosław.
© Noah Saphier.

Population registers that I discovered in my initial online searches indicated that Wolf's father, Leib Brüll, had been a miller and merchant; his mother, Hudessa Brüll (née Steiber), a homemaker. He had an older brother, Nachman, and two younger siblings, Dawid and Pinia, both of whom died in infancy – casualties of a time when village healthcare was rudimentary at best.

His childhood would have been shaped by the rhythms of Jewish life in Jarosław – prayers at the Large Synagogue, studies at the yeshiva, ritual baths at the mikveh, and the hum of the market square, where Jewish merchants like his father conducted business alongside their Polish and Ukrainian neighbours. But this world was fragile, prone to shifting political and social pressures. By 1914, with the outbreak of the First World War, everything changed.

Documentary traces of Wolf's life are sporadic, but I managed to find an online *Meldezettel* (registration certificate) noting his registration in Graz, Austria, in August 1914, the month after Austria-Hungary declared war. Did he flee there with other Galician Jews, escaping the Imperial Russian Army's advance? Jarosław was devastated in the fighting, caught in the tides of battle as Russia pushed westward. Perhaps Wolf sought safety – or opportunity – in Graz, a city that, despite the war, remained a stable commercial hub.

What is certain is that Graz became his home. And by 1918, he was no longer alone. A city archivist from Graz responded to my enquiries with additional helpful documents from the Graz *Stadtarchiv* (city archive): my great-grandparent's marriage certificate, vital records from the births of his children, including my grandfather, Kurt, and a document sanctioning Wolf's ownership of a small store. A treasure trove of documentary evidence!

On 23 June1918, just months before the war's end, Wolf married Maria Taschner, a Catholic woman from Schöpfendorf (now Žepovci, Slovenia), then also part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Their union, documented in the Graz marriage registration, raises many questions. How did a Jewish merchant from Galicia meet a Catholic woman from Slovenia? The most plausible answer lies in the massive displacement of people during the war: Maria, like so many others, may have found herself in Graz as populations shifted.

Curiously, before their marriage in Graz, civil registries show that Wolf and Maria lived briefly in Teplitz, Bohemia (now Teplice, Czechia). This detour suggests they may have visited Wolf's hometown before settling in Graz, perhaps introducing Maria to his family. The Teplitz records also note a striking choice: both declared themselves as secular.

It was a pragmatic decision. In the wake of World War I, antisemitism surged across Central Europe, fueled by economic collapse and nationalist resentment. Many Jews distanced themselves from religion in response, whether for safety or social mobility. Given that Maria was Catholic, their declaration of secularism might also have eased tensions from both sides.

By the 1920s, Wolf had built a life in Graz. He became a merchant, running a successful clothing store in the city center. The couple raised three children: Herta (b. 1922), Leo (b. 1924), and my grandfather, Kurt (b. 1929). Wolf was not only surviving but thriving, an immigrant who had carved out his own piece of Austrian stability.

But stability, like safety, would not last. By 1937, with Nazi ideology seeping into every level of Austrian society, Wolf and Maria seem to have made a drastic decision to convert formally to Roman Catholicism. A year later, after the "Anschluss", Nazi Germany's annexation of Austria on 12 March 1938, they married again in a Catholic church in Vienna, publicly displaying their new faith. The decision was almost

certainly strategic – an attempt to protect their children in a country that no longer recognised Jews as citizens. By then, however, it was already too late.

Eighty-five years later, I stood on the same streets my great-grandfather once walked, searching for traces of his life in Graz. I had addresses – three homes clustered within walking distance of one another. But one residence puzzled me: a house where Wolf had lived for only about a month. It was an oddity. Why such a short stay?

The house – actually a villa perched on the outskirts of Graz – felt out of place in Wolf's trajectory. It was difficult to reach, tucked amid winding rural lanes overlooking the Austrian countryside. It had a grandeur that didn't fit the life of a small merchant. When I finally arrived, I hesitated before knocking. A "Beware of Dog" sign stared back at me.

When I eventually did knock, a young woman answered. I explained why I was there. She listened intently but shook her head – the villa belonged to her grandmother, who was reluctant to receive visitors. She offered to pass along my email address.

Several days later, I received a message from the young woman's grandmother, the current owner of the villa, Eva Mohringer. In the aftermath of my visit, she had asked around and discovered something remarkable: her own grandfather, a doctor, had likely hosted Wolf during a transitional period in the 1930s. Moreover, a family friend remembered her mother, as a young girl, working or shopping at Wolf's store.

The house in Graz, Austria where Wolf once lived.
Courtesy of Eva Mohringer.

This was more than a confirmation of my mother's stories about Wolf's business – it was evidence of the quiet network of non-Jewish Austrians who had supported him: the doctor who offered temporary housing; the shop assistant who interacted with him daily. These small welcoming gestures, and countless others, had helped a Jewish immigrant from Jarosław build what seems to have been a happy, successful life in Graz.

The last trace of Wolf in Graz comes from a Meldezettel in 1938, a fleeting record of residency before he vanishes from official documentation. Austria had been swallowed by the Reich in March. Kristallnacht erupted in November, and Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues were shattered across the country. The Old Synagogue of Graz, built in 1868, was among those destroyed, burned to the ground in front of congregants and bystanders. It is a family story that Wolf was in that crowd, watching the flames consume the community he had built his life within. This anecdote suggests that Wolf, like countless other Jews during the Holocaust and at other times of existential crisis, had continued to practice Judaism secretly despite the potential social and political price.

After the "Anschluss", there was no question: Wolf and his family could not stay in Graz. There were relatives in the United States, and perhaps they considered a route there, imagined themselves safely across the Atlantic, free from the escalating terror. But – due probably to the breakup of Austria-Hungary into smaller nation-states – Wolf and Maria had no passports. Without papers, there was no legal escape. Wolf had no choice but to try to find a way out on his own.

It is impossible to reconstruct his exact path. He was a man slipping between borders, avoiding detection, surviving in hidden places. There are no letters, no diary accounts, only fragments of stories that my aunts and mother heard from their father, along with the known dangers of the time. To attempt to travel in his footsteps, I had to reverse-engineer his journey, tracing his likely movements based on the shifting political landscape of Europe and the testimonies of other Jews who attempted similar escapes.

One story, passed down from my grandfather Kurt, tells that Kurt and his siblings survived the war by hiding in the forests of what is now Slovenia. It is possible that Wolf's first step was to get Maria and the children safely there. It makes sense: Slovenia was close to Graz, and Maria was from Žepovci, just over the border. She would have had family there, friends willing to help. Bringing his family south would have been a logical first step for Wolf before moving on alone. Yugoslavia had not yet fallen to the Germans. It was still a place to breathe.

However logical, there is no way to know for certain. No documents remain to tell us how Wolf reached France. Perhaps he separated from his family in Graz and headed west, risking a journey across the breadth of the Reich into the neutral territory of Switzerland before descending into France. If he did go south, slipping through Yugoslavia and into Italy, how did he travel? Did he board a vessel in Trieste and pass from the Adriatic into the wider Mediterranean? Did he cross northern Italy by train? Did he travel on foot over the mountains? Following these questions, I decided to fill in the blanks in my grandfather's journey with fictionalised vignettes, which take historical information (such as maps depicting the railroad lines in the late 1930s and early 1940s) and the accounts of other fleeing Jews to paint a picture of some of the possibilities of my great-grandfather's own experience.

In the writing of them, the vignettes took on an almost allegorical significance: their schematic nature touches on known perils faced by Jewish refugees in the period. I abstracted my grandfather as "The Man", a stand-in not just for him but for countless

Jews fleeing violence. I ultimately crafted three vignettes, one each for possible journeys on foot, by rail, or aboard ship. While I do not know whether or how closely these vignettes map onto this part of my great-grandfather's story, he would have traveled in at least one of these modes. By placing him within alternative physical and psychic geographies, the vignettes allow Wolf to exist in terrain that history has obscured. Rather than documentary truth, they are an attempt to see him in motion. To understand the choices that were forced upon him. To walk beside him for a moment.

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The Graz Hauptbahnhof is thick with soldiers. Scarlet swastika banners hang brazenly from the portico's three Romanesque arches, so that everyone entering or leaving the station must pass beneath them. A week ago, this was Austria. Now it is something else.

The Man steps inside, hands in his coat pockets, fist clutching the tight ball of his remaining cash and his wife's jewelry. He tells himself it will be enough.

It is quarter past seven. The station pulses with the rhythm of morning – rain drums the high windows; office workers weave past one another; steam hisses as a train exhales into the damp air. Now is the time.

He moves swiftly past the ticket office, falling in step with a group of businessmen, their suits crisp, their shoes polished. At the checkpoint, officers examine tickets one by one. The Man walks with purpose, past them, past the scrutiny, and onto the platform. He does not look back.

Smoke thickens the air, curling around him, clogging his throat. A whistle blows – a sharp, piercing sound that rings in his ears long after it has faded.

"Sir." The Man stops. He turns to see an officer frowning. "Your ticket."

The Man pats his pockets, feigning surprise, buying seconds. The officer's palm is open, waiting. The Man reaches into his coat and presses a crumpled wad of cash into it.

The officer's frown deepens. "This is not a ticket."

Another wad. Almost everything the Man has left.

A long pause. The officer glances down at the desperate offering in his palm; his fingers curl over the money. A smirk. He tucks it away and turns back toward the station.

The Man exhales, his pulse hammering against his ribs. He moves through the smoke-hung platform and steps onto the train.

His compartment stinks of coal and stale tobacco. The air is thick, the curtains drawn against the early-morning gray. The Man slips inside, taking a window seat.

A moment later, the door slides open again and a family of four enters. Two boys, one significantly blonder and shorter than the other, playfully jostle each other as The Man's own sons often did.

"Smoky, isn't it?", the father says.

The Man nods.

"You're soaked", the father adds. "Forgot your raincoat?"

The Man smiles. "Left it at home." He does not say that the coats were sold when the business was shuttered. He had not noticed the rain, had not noticed that he had dampened the seat.

The train horn bellows. The platform shifts, the iron wheels groaning against the steel rails. The Man slides his hand into his pocket, finds the thin, familiar band of his wife's wedding ring, and slips it onto his finger. With his thumb, he rubs the diamond he picked out for her all those years ago. A gift, a promise.

He has no memento of his children. When he finds safety for them all, he will return the ring to his wife. And he will find something for the children, something they can always keep. Something to remember one another by.

A door slides open in the neighboring compartment. The Man stiffens. A ticket officer is moving down the corridor.

The Man moves quickly, stepping over the outstretched legs of the already-dozing family, slipping into the corridor. Without glancing at the officer, he moves in the opposite direction, toward the WC. Inside, he locks the door and leans against the sink, pressing his forehead against the cool metal.

A knock. A violent jolt runs through the Man's body.

"Occupied", the Man calls, voice steadier than he feels.

The knock comes again, harder. He has no choice. He opens the door.

The officer looms before him – taller than the Man, his armband bright against the dim corridor.

"Your ticket."

The Man's head pounds. Sweat beads down his spine. He pats his pocket. The officer shifts, tapping his boot impatiently against the floor. The Man reaches into his coat and presses his last bills into the waiting hand.

The officer's lip curls. "I don't take bribes," he says, even as the bills disappear into jacket. His hand clamps around the Man's wrist, rough, certain.

The Man's breath comes fast and shallow. His left hand scrabbles through his pocket, finds the cool weight of silver. He holds it up and hands it over – the necklace. The officer hesitates but keeps walking, dragging him toward the back of the train. It is not enough.

The Man swallows hard. His fingers curl around the final thing he has left. The ring. His wife's ring.

"Wait", he says. He holds it out.

The officer studies it, rubs the diamond speculatively between his thumb and forefinger. Then, with a small nod, he releases the Man's wrist.

"Safe journey." And he is gone.

The Man presses his forehead against the cold glass of the window. Outside, the train is already leaving the city behind, rain streaking against the pane. He flexes his empty hand. No cash. No necklace. No ring. Only the train, carrying him forward. Toward what, he does not know.

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I traveled to Žepovci, Slovenia, to see my great-grandmother's home village for myself, to stand where Wolf might have stood when he left his family behind. The road curved through the Styrian countryside, past rolling farmland and patches of forest. When I finally saw the welcome sign for Žepovci, population 357, I pulled over and stepped into the long grass to take a photo. Almost immediately, a couple emerged from the house beside me, speaking in Slovenian. At first, I thought they were irritated that my car was blocking their driveway, but as soon as I introduced myself, trying English first, then rusty German, they softened. They were shocked to hear I was from the United States – the first American they had ever met.

They invited me inside for a drink, and I hesitated for only a moment before saying yes. Always say yes to coffee. That has since become my travel mantra, because of what happened next.

We sat within a wooden porch built by the husband, Iztok, a local police officer, drinking homemade lemonade as I explained why I had come. Did they know of any Taschners still living in town? The wife, Nataša, shook her head but pulled out her phone to call a neighbour, an older woman. After a short conversation, she hung up – no, the neighbour said, there were no more Taschners in Žepovci. The village had been mostly Austrian before the war, but it was now entirely Slovenian.

I thanked them and left to explore, stopping to photograph an old fire station. Just as I was about to leave, Nataša called me. She had found someone – an elderly woman who had lived in Žepovci her entire life. Her family had lived next door to the Taschners. She knew where my great-grandmother Maria's house still stood.

I rushed back, following Nataša and Iztok to the place where Maria had been raised. The house stood just across from the fire station; built in 1872, it was a simple structure of wattle and daub with an orange-tiled roof. The years had turned the cream-colored walls gray. The current owner was an artist, the daughter of a man who had bought the house long after Maria's family was gone. Wooden owls, carved by hand, lined the path up to the door. In the yard, cages held baby ducks and chickens, adding soft background noise to the quiet morning.

As I stood there, a neighbor emerged – an old woman and her grandson, a fourteen-year-old boy bursting with excitement at meeting an American. He ran inside and came back holding a bracelet with the U.S. flag on it, something he had gotten on a trip to Croatia.

Set against the weight of the history I was chasing, meeting these kind villagers was a strange moment of warmth.

That afternoon, I drove slowly along the nearby Mur River, which now forms the border between Austria and Slovenia, trying to picture what Wolf must have seen as he crossed. The fields were heavy with corn, cabbage, and pumpkins, the forests dense in patches between open land. Without modern cameras, without GPS, it would have been so easy to disappear here.

I tried to imagine Wolf bringing his family into this landscape, leaving them somewhere safe before moving on alone. What is clear is that he did not stay in Yugoslavia. Somehow, he kept moving, toward a place where he could secure a future for all of them.

He would have likely gone west, toward Italy. Despite Mussolini's fascism, prior to the German occupation, Italian Jews had not yet faced the same level of persecution as

The previous home of Maria's family in Žepovci, Slovenia.
© Noah Saphier.

they later would under the Nazis. It would have been possible to slip through. But Italy was only a corridor. The goal was France. Lyon. The last city where Wolf would be free.

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The Man gazes through the train window, but he does not see the stubborn pines and thick grasses gripping the karst plateau. His mind is elsewhere – painting the faces of his wife and children, still in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Safe, for now. His wife's family has connections in Schöpfendorf. But after the Anschluss, after Kristallnacht, he knows that safety is an illusion. A thing that dissolves overnight.

The train lurches into Trieste, and as the Man steps down onto the platform, a sharp gust barrels in from the sea. The wind tugs his oiled hair loose, plastering damp strands against his forehead. Salt, fish, and coal fill his nostrils, and nausea rises in his throat. Overhead, gulls wheel and scream. When the Man looks up, he sees them in a V-formation, their white bodies stark against a sky already dimming too early. He had not known shorebirds did that. He watches them slip beyond the pine-green Adriatic, longing to follow.

The sun is a heavy, golden disk by the time he reaches the old town. His sweater clings to his back, his feet blistering inside his black leather shoes.

"Good day", says a low voice in German.

The Man stiffens. Turns. A stranger – dark-eyed, sun-leathered – stands at his side.

The Man's gaze flickers to the kippah on his head. "You speak German?", the Man asks cautiously.

"I understand why you are here", the stranger replies. "My name is Levi. Follow me. I will take you for some lunch."

Lunch is in a dim room filled with restless bodies. The Jewish Agency. The air reeks of sweat, unwashed clothing, human fear. Levi weaves through the crowd with practiced ease, pulling the Man along by his sleeve. He stops at a desk buried in papers, flipping through them without looking up.

"We don't have room." He exhales sharply. "But I will make an exception for you." He meets the Man's eyes. "Be at the docks by four. Say nothing."

The Man does not sleep. The night tastes of brine and rust, the city alive with the distant groan of ships and the occasional burst of laughter from sailors in a nearby alley. He rests against the wall of a closed storefront, knees drawn to his chest.

When the time comes, he stands. The streets are silent, the stones damp beneath his shoes.

And then – smoke. At first, he dismisses it as chimney smoke, curling above the rooftops, dissolving into the black sky. But then he smells it, sharp, acrid. And he sees the glow. Near the docks.

The Man quickens his pace. He rounds the last corner, emerging onto the pier just as a vast steamer materialises from the gloom, its hull streaked with rivulets of rain, its decks crawling with passengers. A path to freedom.

Bodies press against one another, desperate, the dock slick with mist and seawater. Somewhere, a baby wails, roused by the freezing rain.

A firm hand claps the Man's shoulder. He jerks around to see Levi's face, damp and pale in the flickering gaslight.

"You made it, my friend."

"What is this?" The Man's voice is hoarse.

Levi grins, baring small, sharp teeth. "Your salvation. A ship to the Promised Land." The Man hesitates. "You do want to live in peace, don't you?", Levi presses.

The Man says nothing. He watches Levi's expression shift – his grin fading, forehead tightening. For a long moment, they stand in the rain, both breathing hard.

"You know", Levi says at last, voice forced-light, "these steamships are built for any weather. A little storm won't –".

"My family."

Levi exhales. Nods once. "If you stay, you stay." He steps back, tilting his head toward the ship. "But I have others to save." And then he is gone, vanishing into the throng, helping the elderly onto the vessel, shielding infants from the rain.

The Man stands frozen, the gangplank swaying before him. His fingers twitch at his sides. Eretz Yisrael, the millennia-long dream of his people. Every year at Pesach, the Man and his family say "Next year in Jerusalem". Should he board? Palestine was so far away. Would the Germans take Yugoslavia? Would his family survive?

The ship's whistle splits the pre-dawn darkness, a long, wailing sound. A final call. The Man lifts his head, scanning the dark sky. The gulls are there, rising and falling with the wind, their V-formation slicing through the storm.

And he knows. He will stay. He will find a way back to Yugoslavia. To them. He will get papers, any papers, and they will leave together.

The Man steps back from the dock. He turns, disappearing into the city's labyrinth of rain-slicked streets. Behind him , the ship slips away from land, its lights vanishing into the void.

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Wolf's trail does not solidify again in the historical record until he turns up in Lyon. Precisely when he arrived there is unclear, but it is almost certain that he entered the country prior to the Fall of France in June 1940.

From Fourvière Hill in Lyon, if you look eastward on a clear day, you can see the jagged silhouettes of the Alps in the distance – a glacial wall separating France from Switzerland and Italy. There were legal crossings: train routes through Geneva or Turin, controlled by border guards scrutinising every passport. But for those without papers, there were only the old smuggling trails across perilous ridges, where a single misstep could mean death.

It is possible that Wolf took one of these paths. Having come so far, at the seeming end of his journey he may have been forced to climb into the ice and the wind, relying on strangers to lead him through the mountains under cover of darkness.

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By the time the sun peeks over the eastern mountains, lighting up the blue ice beneath the granitic teeth of the Graian Alps and shedding patches of golden light on the valley, the two travelers are already high above the floor of Val Veny. They follow a path that switchbacks its way up the mountainside, the Man puffing along heavily in the wake of the smuggler's swift, sure footsteps. Below them, tiny blue clouds rise from the stone chimneys of slate-roofed houses, hinting at the warmth within. The Man looks back seldom, knowing such comforts are merely a dream in a world where survival can mean treks through trackless mountains and unfriendly valleys. Otherwise beautiful landscapes pose threats to the Man's life as he travels dangerous paths to avoid guards, warmed only by his thin wool sweater, decorated with holes. The Man has become numb to the smell of sweat that the sweater has collected.

"Just follow me", the smuggler, Gio, had said as they set out. The smuggler had become almost cordial once the Man had handed over his wife's gold ring. "If there is danger, it will come at the border. There is not usually a guard on this side. But." Gio shrugged. Afterward, they hadn't spoken.

They reach a bridle of mountain pine and spruce. The Man has always thought that evergreen trees are the best trees. He likes when things are consistent, a liking he has had difficulty shaking off.

The smuggler leads the Man up and down over mountain spurs and through hollows – rising steadily but holding within the tree line. The Man finds himself feeling light-headed, breathing more rapidly than usual. He tries to stay vigilant but keeps getting caught in waking dreams of bringing his family, his wife and kids, to see this place in the time after this time. The children could fish in these alpine ponds, while he and his wife built a roaring fire and snuggled close. His wife. Would there come a day when they would be all together again? Would they ever be able –

Suddenly Gio swings his arm around the Man's neck, throwing them both to the ground. The Man's head smacks a tree stump with a thunk. He swallows the pain, brings a hand to his temple where he feels the wetness of fresh blood. Then he hears rustling in the ferns and bracken that carpet the forest floor.

Gio's face is marble. He holds a finger to his lips. The Man turns his head fractionally so that he can see through the trees. His heart is pumping so hard that he worries it will escape his body. Under the trees some distance away, he sees a dark shape, not moving. It is a deeper shadow within the shadows. A border guard? The shadow moves and Gio laughs.

He gets up and pats the Man on the shoulder. "Scared of a little chamois goat?" He laughs again and tosses the Man a square of linen to hold against the cut on his head. He points in the direction they've been traveling. "You can see France from here."

The sharp crack of a rifle shatters the stillness under the trees. The chamois falls to the ground, and Gio and the Man drop too, attempting to vanish among the ferns. Minutes pass until they see a man in the green wool of the Guardia alla Frontiera stalk toward the downed goat from deeper within the forest.

Their foreheads almost touching, the Man can see the sweat beading on Gio's brow despite the late afternoon chill in the shadows of the wood. He can feel wetness on his own face, but he's uncertain whether it's sweat or blood.

They wait and watch as the guard squats over his kill and begins to dress it out. The Man's leg is trapped at an odd angle by the sudden slump to the forest floor, and his foot begins to go numb. He's terrified that any sound, any movement will betray them.

"France", Gio whispers almost inaudibly, crooking a finger. The Man reads his lips more than hears him.

"What?", the Man mouths. Their faces are close, as if building toward a kiss.

"Just head downhill." Gio smiles a tight smile.

The Man risks a tiny negative movement of his head. No. But Gio pushes up to his knees and then breaks into a run, heading back the way they've come. The border guard's head snaps up from the carcass.

"Halt!" But Gio keeps running, breaking brush and weaving between pine trunks. The guard unslings his rifle and gives chases, yelling. The Man presses closer to the mossy forest floor, willing himself to disappear.

Moments later, the forest is quiet again. How long should I wait, the Man wonders. Even if Gio managed to escape, surely the guard would return for his kill.

The Man realises that Gio saved him. This stranger, a smuggler, had proven to be a friend – and then vanished almost in the same moment. Another loss. The Man rises to his feet. He turns in the direction Gio indicated and hurries downhill, toward France.

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In the heart of Lyon, two rivers converge: the Saône, still carrying the sedimentary memory of the rounded summits of the Vosges, flows into the Rhône, darkened here to mud-brown from its turquoise origins high in the Alps. Prominent hills also help to shelter the site: Fourvière to the west and Croix-Rousse to the north and east. Over the centuries, Lyon's combination of topographical and economic advantages made it an attractive destination for those seeking opportunity or refuge. Spared by the bulwark of the Alps from the ravages of World War I, the city became a place of recuperation for thousands of wounded. It became a refuge again after the Fall of France early in World War II, when it found itself in the zone libre, welcoming Jewish and other refugees from the *zone occupée* and from elsewhere in Europe. As the Nazis occupied northern France, Lyon, along with most of the south, fell under the control of the Vichy regime, the French collaborationist government. Though Vichy's anti-Jewish laws mirrored German policies, the city had not yet succumbed to full Nazi control. That came later.

My exploration of Lyon was guided by information I obtained from France's *Mémorial de la Shoah*; there, I discovered Wolf's local address, his occupation, and the site of his ultimate capture by Klaus Barbie. Visiting Lyon's *Centre d'histoire de la résistance et de la déportation* (Resistance and Deportation History Center) offered additional insight: I learned more about Lyon's Free French Resistance movements and underground Jewish movements, and watched footage from Barbie's trial, during which survivors gave grisly accounts of his torture tactics that were used to convict him of crimes against humanity.

From the documents and museum visits, I learned that Wolf supported himself in Lyon as a painter, renting a modest room on Rue de la Monnaie, in the heart of the old city. He lived among other immigrants – Lyon had long been a city shaped by movement, by waves of workers and exiles. Before the war, its working-class population swelled by 25,000 foreigners, a reflection of its economic dynamism. By the time Wolf arrived, it had become something else: a crossroads of resistance and quiet survival.

Prewar Lyon was also home to approximately 5,000 Jews, and many more sought refuge there after fleeing the Nazi-controlled north. Lyon's twisting streets, its *traboules* – narrow, hidden passageways threading through buildings – offered shelter to resistance fighters and fugitives alike. But by 1942, that fragile safety began to erode.

That year, Klaus Barbie, just twenty-nine years old, took over the city's Gestapo headquarters at the Hôtel Terminus. If Wolf had found even a moment of security in Lyon, it did not last. The city had been dangerous before. Barbie made it lethal. Soon to be infamous as the Butcher of Lyon, Barbie specialised in terror. He perfected his methods of torture in the cells beneath his office, using electric prods, boiling water, and blunt force. He arrested and personally interrogated Jean Moulin, one of the highest-ranking figures in the French Resistance.

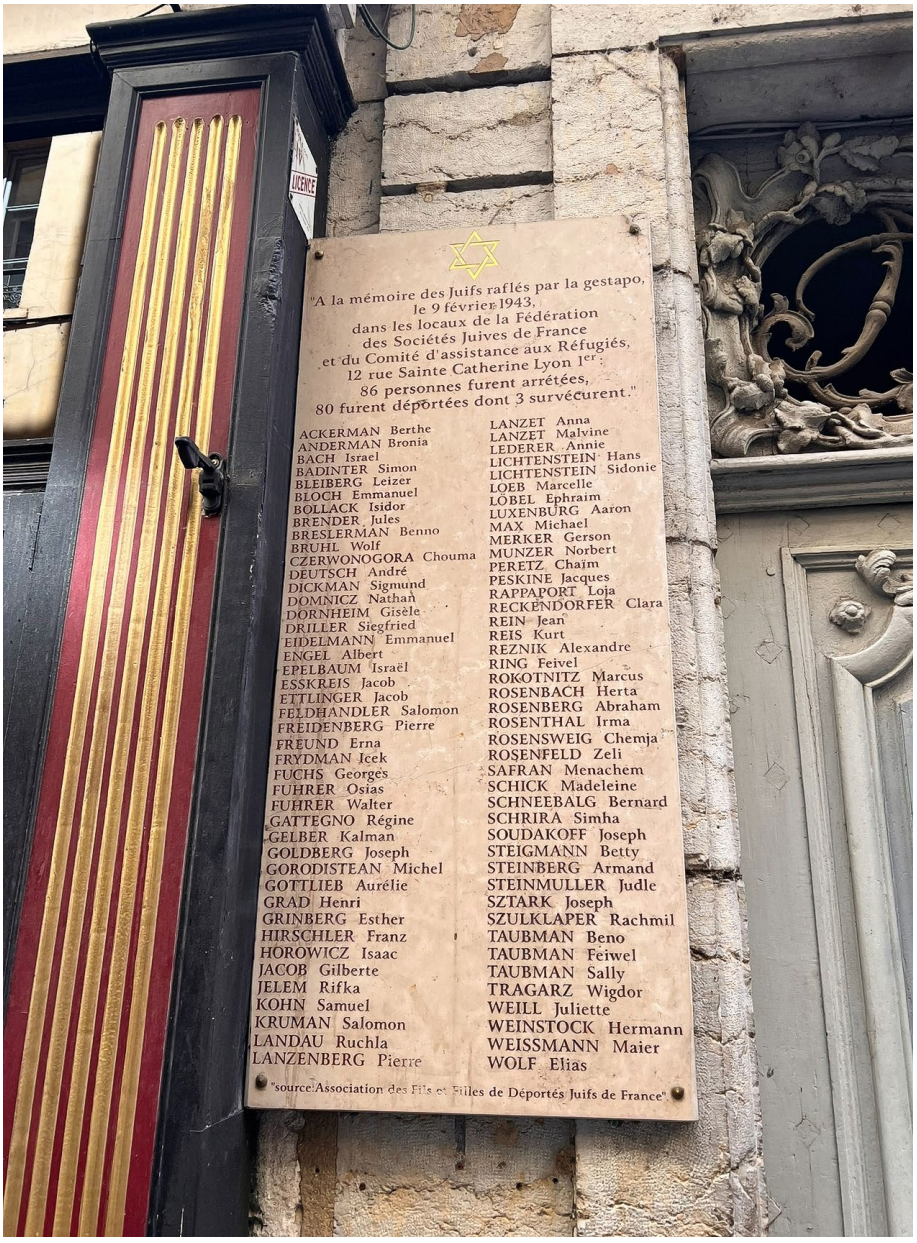
By early 1943, the Gestapo's grip on Lyon was tightening. Jewish refugees like Wolf lived under constant threat. And yet – there was still hope.

As the cold, clear morning of 9 February 1943, dawned, that hope must have seemed closer than ever to Wolf. Word had spread that the *Fédération des Sociétés Juives de France* (FSJF) was distributing free meals and healthcare supplies that morning at their office at 12 Rue Sainte-Catherine. The FSJF, an underground Jewish organisation, was also known to help forge identity papers – a lifeline for those trying to flee. A new life in the Americas or Palestine, together with his family, must have seemed so close.

But the proffered help was a trap. The Gestapo had infiltrated the FSJF, forcing arrested members to lure others in. By the time Wolf stepped through the door, the operation was already compromised. Outside, Nazi secret police and soldiers were waiting.

Organised personally by Barbie himself, the Sainte-Catherine Roundup was swift and methodical. Eighty-six people were taken that day – a mix of refugees, resistance members, and those simply desperate for food. They were loaded into trucks and driven away.

The building where the arrests took place still stands. A commemorative plaque outside the door of what is now an apartment building lists the names of the abducted. In October 2019, the plaque was vandalised, black marker slashing through the names, a grim reminder that history is never fully buried. Now restored, the plaque stares out from a graffitied wall in the narrow street of Saint-Catherine.



Rue Sainte-Catherine Roundup plaque.
© Noah Saphier.

Following the raid at Rue Sainte-Catherine, Wolf was held first in one of the local prisons in Lyon, awaiting transport. It is unclear exactly which prison he was sent to – Montluc Prison, a Gestapo-controlled facility where resistance members and Jewish detainees were frequently held, was already filled to capacity. Wherever he was imprisoned, Wolf would have endured overcrowded cells, interrogations, and the fear of being singled out for execution – along with the agonising uncertainty of what came next.

On 12 February 1943, Wolf and eighty-three others from the roundup were transported north to Drancy Internment Camp, a converted apartment complex just outside Paris. By then, Drancy was the largest transit camp in France, the final stop before deportation to the death camps. Wolf had spent years running from the Nazis. In Drancy, there was nowhere left to run.

The complex, built in the 1930s as a modernist housing project, had long since been transformed into a prison complex. Its U-shaped structure loomed over a barren yard, where thousands of prisoners milled about under the eyes of armed guards. Originally run by French police, the camp was later handed over to direct Nazi control. By the time Wolf arrived, over 7,000 prisoners were crammed into a space designed for 700.

Despite its being my first visit to Paris, Drancy was my priority before I saw the Eiffel Tower or the Louvres or Versailles. From the outside, the former camp looked unremarkable – a typical Parisian housing block, laundry fluttering from balconies, Spider-Man scooters abandoned near doorsteps. I walked through the fenced-in courtyard, past the worn-down play equipment, past the memorial that now marks the site. I couldn't help but wonder whether the people who lived there now, knew.

Did they know that thousands of children once lived in these same rooms, awaiting deportation? Did they know that, in 1943, my great-grandfather had stood in this same courtyard, trapped in a system of mass death that would lead to his murder?

The Nazis and their collaborators at Drancy identified their prisoners only by numbers – a bureaucratic first step in a vast process of dehumanisation. 64,000 Jews

Noah Saphier taking photos of the old Drancy Internment Camp complex.
© Noah Saphier.

Drancy, Paris: children's scooters.
© Noah Saphier.

passed through the camp, the vast majority continuing to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Only 2,000 survived the war.

Wolf spent almost three weeks in Drancy, waiting for the inevitable. He must have wondered if his family was still alive. By 1943, the Nazis had long since invaded Yugoslavia. He must have known. He must have feared the worst.

On 2 March 1943, his name appeared on the deportation list for Convoy 49. At the *Umschlagplatz* at nearby Le Bourget Station, Wolf and 999 others – including forty-four children, one just four years old – were loaded into cattle cars. No seats. No windows. No information beyond rumor about what lay ahead.

The journey stretched over two days, stopping and starting through France, Germany, and into occupied Poland. Some prisoners likely guessed where they were headed. Others believed the Nazi lie – that they were simply being "resettled" further east. By 1943, there were whispered accounts of mass killings, of chimneys that never stopped smoking. But few could have understood the scale of what awaited them.

Railroad tracks at Birkenau.
© Noah Saphier.

On March 4th, Convoy 49 arrived at Auschwitz. At the ramp, SS officers sorted the prisoners into two groups – those deemed "fit to work" and those sent immediately to the gas chambers. Of the 1,000 people on Convoy 49, only 119 were selected for forced labor – 100 men, 19 women. The rest were murdered upon arrival. Of Convoy 49, only six people survived until liberation.

My visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau began in Auschwitz I, the original concentration camp. Built in 1940 as a labor and detention center, it quickly became a killing ground. I had seen photos and videos of Auschwitz before, studied maps and statistics. I thought I had grasped its horror. But nothing could have prepared me for standing inside it.

Above me, the mockery of "*Arbeit Macht Frei*" – Work Makes You Free. Around me, barbed wire fences enclosed a place where innocence had been deemed criminal. Everywhere I stood I imagined someone standing there before me – humans being marched, beaten, shot, hanged. The watchtowers loomed over the perimeter, where guards had once fired at anyone who moved too close to the fence.

Most people who arrived at Auschwitz disembarked from cattle cars, disoriented from days without light or sustenance. They surrendered their belongings at the platform, writing their names and addresses on suitcases with chalk so they could reclaim them later – a cruel deception intended to keep them compliant.

The process was designed for maximum efficiency: men to one side, women and children to the other. The SS physicians performed their selection in seconds, determining who would live and who would die. The able-bodied were sent toward the labor camp. The rest – children, the elderly, the sick, mothers holding their babies – were marched toward the gas chambers.

Despite extensive research, I have found no documentation of Wolf's exact fate at Auschwitz. Because he was sixty-two years old, he was almost certainly deemed unfit for forced labor and sent directly to Birkenau, where most members of Convoy 49 were gassed upon arrival.

When the Red Army liberated Auschwitz in January 1945, they found only a few thousand prisoners still alive. The Nazis had murdered the rest or forced them on death marches westward deeper into the shrinking Reich. As they fled, the Nazis destroyed much of Birkenau in a hurried attempt to erase their crimes, dynamiting the gas chambers and burning the barracks.

Looking towards the area where the ashes were dumped.
© Noah Saphier.

Today, little remains of the crematoria where hundreds of thousands of Jews, including most of Convoy 49, were murdered. What was once a mass killing site is now a field of ruins and charred brick, overgrown with grass. Nearby, a small pond reflects the sky, its surface deceptively serene. Here, the Nazis dumped the ashes of their victims – the final resting place for tens of thousands, including, almost certainly, Wolf.

I stood there, staring at the water, knowing that my great-grandfather's body had been reduced to something weightless, something that could be washed away. The Nazis had not even granted him the dignity of a grave. But they failed to make his memory disappear.

Wolf did not live to see the world after the war. But his family did. His wife, Maria, and their children – Herta, Leo, and Kurt – all survived the Holocaust. After the war, Kurt David Brühl, Wolf's youngest son, built a life that honored his father's legacy.

Like Wolf, Kurt became a merchant. In Graz, he opened his own clothing department store, calling it Brühl und Söhne – Brühl and Sons. Over time, it grew into one of the most successful clothiers in Austria, with flagship stores in Vienna and other major cities. The family name, nearly erased by the Nazis, was now printed in bold on shop signs in the very country that had once sought to destroy them.

But Kurt's greatest work was not in business – it was in rebuilding the Jewish community of Austria. For over forty years, he served as a board member of the Israelite Community of Graz, and from 1980 to 2000, he led it as its president. In 2000, he oversaw the completion of one of his most important projects – the reconstruction of the synagogue his family had attended before it was burned on Kristallnacht. The same synagogue that Wolf had once prayed in, destroyed in a night of hate, now stood again, a symbol of resilience.

Noah Saphier by the New Synagogue of Graz, Austria.
© Noah Saphier.

Kurt received numerous honors for his philanthropy – the Silver Medal for Services to the Republic of Austria, the Gold Medal of the State Capital of Graz, the Human Rights Award of the City of Graz. In 1982, he was named Honorary Consul of Great Britain and Northern Ireland for the states of Carinthia and Styria, and in 1989, he became an Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (OBE). In 1999, he became an honorary citizen of the University of Graz.

And now, Wolf Brühl, who left no grave behind in Auschwitz, has a memorial stone in the Jewish cemetery of Graz.

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My grandfather Kurt has always been a role model for me. But this past summer, I felt closer to him than ever before – I felt pride, not just in him, but in being part of his lineage, of being connected to his father, Wolf, a quietly heroic man from a tiny Polish village.

Since 1945, many of those who survived the Shoah have borne witness to its horrors, sometimes at great personal risk. Today, as the final survivors of the Holocaust are passing away, I feel that it is our responsibility to take up the task of remembrance and witness. We must carry forward and share the stories of those who survived and those who did not.

The Holocaust did not end antisemitism or eliminate hate. The images I saw on my journey – red handprints smeared on a Holocaust memorial in France, Jewish graves vandalised with swastikas, the plaque on Rue Sainte-Catherine defaced with black ink – tell a different story. According to the BBC, antisemitic incidents in Britain have increased 103 per cent since 2022. According to the Anti-Defamation League, antisemitic incidents in the U.S. surged 360 per cent in the three months after 7 October 2023.

These statistics point to an urgent truth: studying the horrors of the Holocaust is not merely an act of remembrance but also a call to action. In trying to understand this dark chapter of human history, we equip ourselves with the resolve to ensure that such atrocities are never repeated.

I have learned at firsthand what so many Jews before me have known: that my family's story, and the collective Jewish story, is not only one of loss but of survival. The Nazis failed to erase the Jewish people. They murdered Wolf, but his wife, his sons, and his daughter all survived. His son, Kurt, did not simply rebuild a life – he rebuilt a community.

If someone had asked me before this journey whether I understood the Holocaust, I would have answered without hesitation: of course. Six million Jews murdered.

I now realise that knowing a number is not the same as knowing the Holocaust. Six million is incomprehensible. It is too vast, too abstract. It does not contain Wolf's name. It does not contain his years in Graz, his family, his work, his escape, his hopes for the future.

I knew so little about Wolf before I began this journey. Some of what I thought I knew turned out to be wrong. So much remains unknowable. The Nazis not only killed him – they also tried to erase the documentation of his life. What I have pieced together is only one story out of six million. But it is one more name – tiny, recovered fragments of a full life that can be carried forward and shared.

In Graz, the current leader of the Jewish community, President Elie Rosen, walked me through the synagogue that my grandfather helped rebuild. Standing in that space, I understood my grandfather, and his father, in a way I never had before. Later that day, I put a stone on Wolf's grave marker and said the Mourner's Kaddish in his memory:

Oseh shalom bi-m'romav, hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu v'al kol yisrael, v'imru amen.

Wolf Brühl commemorative tombstone.
© Noah Saphier.

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