The Photo

Glücksthal in 1993. A "still from a horror film."

My friend said it looked like a still from a horror film. I chuckled awkwardly and said no, that she was wrong. I couldn't fault her. She didn't know the story behind that picture. Even after I told her everything, I don't think she could feel it, she couldn't understand how so many of my daydreams exist because of that single photo.

The photos were posted online, years after a German called Michael Grohn traveled to Bubno, Ukraine to visit his extended family. Grohn called the village by the name his ancestors might have called it: Glücksthal. I had heard of this place from my grandfather before he died. Even as young as three, I sat proudly in the buddy seat of the combine harvester, and my attention now and then drifted from the mesmerizing disappearance of the corn or beans to the tales of Volhynia my grandfather told. He was born in Germany and never set foot in Ukraine; the few stories he knew of Glücksthal were memories or partial memories of his father, Albert, a native of Glücksthal, who died fifteen years before I was born.

Picturing Glücksthal, however, was like trying to read a message written in chalk after it had rained. Maybe if I strained my eyes, I could try to discern meaning, but up close, there was no detail other than faded streaks of color. I despaired that I couldn't see what was written, and all I was left as consolation was my desperate imagination. Parts of myself, of Glücksthal, were missing, and when I was young, I spent many sleepless nights wishing that my great-grandfather's long-lost memories would implant themselves in my consciousness. I felt as though part of me teetered on the edge of oblivion.

I learned later that I wasn't alone in that feeling. Part of the Volhynian Germans' collective cultural heritage is a dire longing for all that was lost and forgotten. In equal measure, we treasure as family heirlooms the memories that endure.

It was only after my grandfather was dead and my great-grandmother, perhaps the last living Volhynian German, started suffering from dementia, that I began my investigation of our family. Too often our loved ones are gone once we are mature enough to ask them the most important questions. The allure and the emptiness remained inside me, and I felt compelled to search for

truths, stories, and memories that I might never find. Who would've thought that one of my strongest inspirations was just a few keystrokes away?

I could hardly breathe when I saw Grohn's pictures. It was as though time stopped, and my heart sank inside my chest. Never had I imagined Glücksthal as somber and desolate as his photos showed. I wasn't sure whether I should cry tears of joy for seeing Glücksthal for the first time, or to weep for how old and sad the place looked. I sat catatonic before my computer for a long time until the shock dissipated, and my soul resolved to resurrect my great-grandfather's village in my mind's eye.

A stroll through Glücksthal.

Over two years, I read every existing scrap of paper about the Volhynian Germans and my family's history. Hertha Karasek-Strzygowski sketched out beautiful scenes of simpler yet sorrowful times, and Leonhard Kremring and Alfred Cammann showed me the lost world of intimate Volhynian German society before the great tragedies of the early 20th century. I rekindled ties to the Volhynian German cousins living in Germany and attempted to reach those still in Russia without success. One cousin in Cologne sent me a veritable treasure trove of documents, including my great-grandfather's twenty-page autobiography written in the late 1950s.

As my study of the Volhynians grew in scope, I altered Grohn's photos in my mind so the landscape did not seem so bleak. I cleared the sky of clouds and replaced them with a vast, blue expanse and warm sun. A stork lazily flapped its wings above. The fields were plowed, mostly clear of weeds, and sown with wheat, rye, and sunflowers, and fecund black earth struck the eye. The youngest children played or helped their mothers in the kitchen gardens, the girls and boys picked weeds and rocks from the fields or tended the livestock, and the men instructed all, fixed fences and houses and farm implements, thought about crop yields and eternal salvation, and wiped the sweat of honest work from their brow.

I couldn't help but write about what I saw. I wove my visions of Volhynia into the stories of my ancestors and my great-grandparents' memories. I fell asleep and dreamed that I stood behind the plow and two bulky oxen, prayed in the prayer hall, and ate the excellent suppers cooked by great-grandfather's grandmother, and when I woke up, I told everyone I knew about my dreams. I showed them Grohn's pictures with awe. I asked them, "Don't you feel something missing? Don't you want to go there?" With the conviction of a doomsday prophet, I told everyone I met about

this beautiful place they never knew existed. But they couldn't understand. The same emptiness didn't exist inside them. I wrote and wrote until my fingers ached and my brain was fried. I had written a book.

Writing the story of my great-great-grandmother Rosalie Scheming's youth and early adulthood became, however, almost burdensome as I realized my written words could never hope to reflect the beauty I imagined in Glücksthal. Every word, every turn of phrase, every attempt at credible storytelling seemed awkward, insipid, gaudy, or simply uninteresting. I wrote 100,000 words of boiler fodder, and I resented my own hubris to think I was worthy of telling my family's stories. I recalled a famous author's words to me, where she told me it was a privilege to tell these stories, and I rolled my eyes. I was an unworthy vessel.

I printed all 300 pages I'd written about Rosalie Scheming and shelved them.

Other stories consumed my time during the following year, and school otherwise kept me busy. I began writing a semi-fiction about my great-grandmother's family. I wrote two short stories, one about a man who longed to be a father and another about a barren woman who became obsessed with daffodils. My great-grandmother had died by then, on November 17th of all days, the same day Catherine the Great died. To help me grieve, I played the old German songs she liked on our record player and recalled the awful and terrifying stories she'd told me about the Great Terror and the refugee march to Germany in the waning days of WWII.

The author and his great-grandmother.

It fell to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren to clean out her farmhouse in rural Minnesota. We sifted through five decades' worth of necessities and keepsakes, trashing some things, donating others. Some things were priceless, like photo albums, but not one picture of Volhynia survived in that house. As our tasks became more monotonous, it was easy to throw away anything that didn't catch the eye. I can't say what caused me to rescue two unmarked cassette tapes from oblivion. It was lucky I did. Those tapes contained the voices of the dead.

"Kannste mich hören, Irma?" my great-grandfather asks his sister over the phone; can she hear him? She is in Tomsk, Siberia, and has been for the last almost thirty years. During their conversation, I hear nothing from Siberia other than screeched fragments of words, "Ja," "Nein," and the Soviet phone operator interrupting Irma's silence: "Gavarite!" — speak!

In the other tape, my great-grandfather is older, and I can hear the weariness in his voice, though he wouldn't yet have been 60 years old when the tape was recorded. He recalls his story, starting in Glücksthal, Ukraine, and up to his family's arrival in Osceola, Iowa. He says Glücksthal was the most beautiful village in the world, his motherland, the place where his cradle stood. But he, his mother, sister, cousins, uncles, aunts, and friends were all swept away by the war, and if they lived, they carried on to their new lives elsewhere. Some, like his mother, died soon after the war.

No one can say what his mother Rosalie died of after her seven years in the Gulag. Starvation, exhaustion, a broken heart… Speculation is futile yet irresistible, painful, and constant.

I sent the recordings of his voice to all the family members I could, many of whom also had never heard their Opa's voice before. I cried many times over those recordings, and again, I found Michael Grohn's pictures of Glücksthal. With a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes, I decided to make Glücksthal sing.

It is so easy to loathe one's writing because it is so hard to put precisely to paper that which one sees in their soul. But after my book about Rosalie's youth had rested on the shelf for a few months, I found it was much easier to identify which elements of my narrative were lackluster and which were exceptional. I had deftly communicated the sights of Glücksthal — the people, houses, birds, trees, livestock. Vision is key to narrative, yet sight alone does not make a story. I wanted to make Glücksthal a chorus of all five senses, I wanted to submerge the reader in this wonderous place my great-grandfather described. Over several months, I edited page after page, marking each up as many as sixty times, and requiring all along that every word, sentence, and paragraph worked toward my goal of making Glücksthal fabulous.

"You'll grow up with this book," one of my friends told me during those revisions. "You'll always come back to this book and find things that are gorgeous and things that disappoint you. So give it away. Show it to people, and see what they think, because it will never be perfect."

I took her advice to heart and began sharing my work, but it's a hard ask for your friends to read a 300-page manuscript. I asked anyway. While they are reading, I keep finding things wrong and right in the book. I keep growing up.

I gave a talk in May 2026 about how I researched and wrote the still-unpublished book, and it was during a practice run that one of my friends remarked that the Grohn pictures looked like stills from a horror film. I corrected her and moved on. The next day, the small auditorium filled up with attendees, and I spoke for an hour on the whys and hows of my project. Afterward, applause. Pats on the back. Cookies and coffee. Well-wishes as I continued on to graduate school.

Someday I will go there, but I know there will be almost nothing left. Rotting wood from the cottages and maybe old fenceposts will be the last vestiges of Glücksthal. I must go. I must see it for myself and take pictures so that someday my children will see the same desolation and wish for Glücksthal to return. For a moment that might last as long as eternity, I will stand in the field where my great-grandfather's cradle stood, and I will smell the manure spread on the fields, I will hear the squawking of storks and the rustle of the grass beneath my feet, I will feel the wind whistle around my ears, I will savor the aroma of bean soup carried on the wind, and I will open my eyes and see before me the great feast my ancestors have prepared in the village center. They will tell me they have been waiting for me ever since I was born.