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Hotel Tiberias

A Tale of Two Grandfathers

Sebastian Hope

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Hotel Tiberias: A Tale of Two Grandfathers

Аннотация

Part history, part travel journal and part autobiography, 'Hotel Tiberias' is a journey of many layers and resonances, as Sebastian Hope follows the tumultuous story of his family's hotel in Palestine.In 1900,Thomas Cook, who had been running tours of the Holy Land since the 1890s, financed the building of a hotel in Tiberias, the largest town on the Sea of Galilee, which had long been a stopover point for Christian pilgrims. The hotel, built, run and eventually owned by Richard Grossmann, was situated in the Sanjak of Acre, part of the Ottoman Empire, and after the First World War found itself in the British mandated territory of Palestine, prospering under British rule until the Second World War, after which the hotel was eventually confiscated by the fledgling state of Israel in 1948.With the hotel as the pivotal point in the story, Sebastian Hope researches the story of his grandmother, Margaret Frena and her two husbands, Fritz Grossman (Richard Grossman's son), who shot himself dead in 1938, the year Nazi Germany annexed the Sudetenland, and John Winthrop Hackett (General Sir John Hackett) who served with the TransJordan Frontier Force.Journeying through Rhineland Germany, Turkey and the Middle East, his research takes him to some strange places as he

weaves a wonderful, strong family story into a rich, sweeping backdrop of both time and place. Just as he unravels the tumultuous history of the area, Hope digs deep into the history and layers of his own family, and discovers how family histories have an archaeology too.

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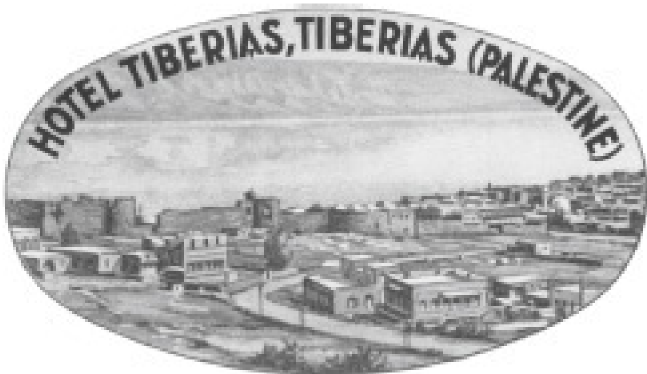
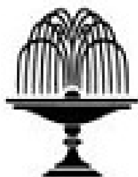
HOTEL TIBERIAS
A Tale of Two Grandfathers



SEBASTIAN HOPE



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PRAISE

From the reviews of *Hotel Tiberias*:

‘One half of Hope’s story describes the romantic derring-do soldiering of Hackett, whose steps are traced in a modern-day journey to “Palestine”, the other tracks the more elusive figure of Grossmann, from a family of Templars who settled in Palestine … Hope writes so honestly about his lost German family that we share his urgent desire to acquit them of charges of Nazi sympathies … it is heartening to see [Grossmann] rescued from wartime slanders by a grandson who never knew him but will not let him fade’

Sunday Times

‘Hope indicates a new direction in the British travel book: a post-colonial search for roots and for explanations in their families’ involvement in the recent history of the British imperial endeavour’

TLS

‘Hope is a seasoned travel writer and his descriptive writing is vivid and convincing … [*Hotel Tiberias*] achieves real pathos. All families have their hidden as well as public histories. *Hotel Tiberias* gives us a poignant glimpse into a particularly dramatic example’

Independent on Sunday

‘The politics of the Middle East are sketched with verve …

Hope's meditation on his grandfather's suicide and the region's history is written with conviction and clarity'

Scotland on Sunday

'Hope takes us down all sorts of intriguing avenues and gives us a vivid and unusual perspective on an endlessly fascinating chapter of the twentieth century'

Edward Stourton, *Tablet*

'Moving, intelligent, highly readable and occasionally extremely funny, this is a fine book indeed'

Geographical Magazine

DEDICATION

In memory of Dore Vorster 1906–2003
and
despite Barnaby

EPIGRAPH

Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum. Quid enim est aetas hominis, nisi ea memoria rerum veterum cum superiorum aetate contexitur?

To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain a child forever. For what is the worth of human life unless it is woven into that of our ancestors by the records of history?

CICERO, *Orator*, XXXIV, 120

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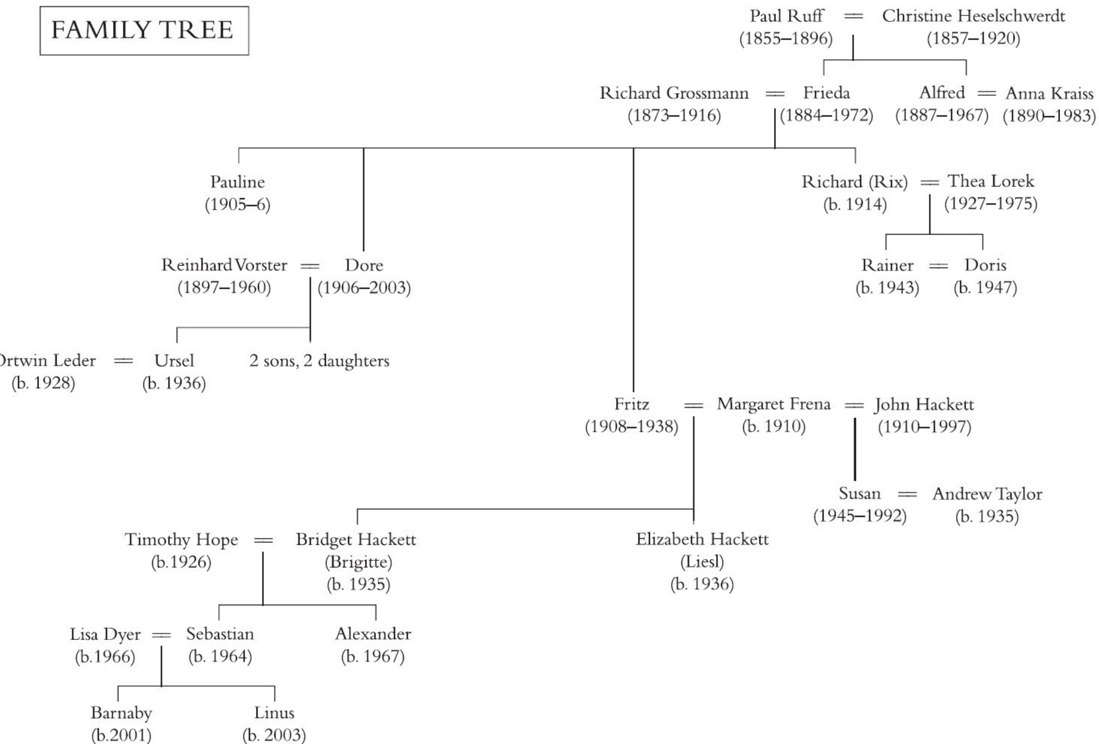
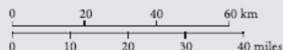

FAMILY TREE
Paul Ruff = Christine Heselschwerdt
(1855–1896) (1857–1920)
Richard Grossmann = Frieda
(1873–1916) (1884–1972)
Alfred = Anna Kraiss
(1887–1967) (1890–1983)
Pauline
(1905–6)
Reinhard Vorster = Dore
(1897–1960) (1906–2003)
Ortwin Leder = Ursel
(b. 1928) (b. 1936)
2 sons, 2 daughters
Fritz = Margaret Frena = John Hackett
(1908–1938) (b. 1910) (1910–1997)
Richard (Rix) = Thea Lorek
(b. 1914) (1927–1975)
Rainer = Doris
(b. 1943) (b. 1947)
Susan = Andrew Taylor
(1945–1992) (b. 1935)
Timothy Hope = Bridget Hackett
(b.1926) (Brigitte)
(b. 1935)
Elizabeth Hackett
(Liesl)
(b. 1936)
Lisa Dyer = Sebastian
(b.1966) (b. 1964)
Alexander
(b. 1967)
Barnaby
(b.2001)
Linus
(b. 2003)

Israel



† Former Templer settlements
Roads
Railways
Borders
Battles

BEIRUT
LEBANON
R. Litani
Bekaa Valley
Sidon
DAMASCUS
Nabatiye
Mt. Hermon
Tyre
SYRIA
L. Huleh
Golan/Jawlan
Hauran
Cease-Fire Line
Safed
Acre
Horns of Hattin (1187)
Lake Tiberias
Haifa
Ezra'a
Neuhardthof
Betlehem
Tiberias
Mt. Carmel
Waldheim
Samakh
R. Yarmouk
Nazareth
Mediterranean Sea
Haifa spur (dismantled)
Afula
Dera'a
Irbid
Beisan
Jenin
Netanya
Tulkarm
Ajlun
Jerash
Nablus
R. Jordan
WEST BANK
Tel Aviv
Sarona
Zerka
Jaffa
Wilhelma
Ramallah
AMMAN
Ramle
Jericho
JERUSALEM
JORDAN
Bethlehem
Hejaz Railway
Gaza
Hebron
Dead Sea

The Middle East in 1939
ROMANIA
BULGARIA
SOFIA
Edirne
Black Sea
Cherkessk
Grozny
U. S. S. R.
GEORGIA
Tbilisi
AZERBAIJAN
Baku
Caspian Sea
ARMENIA
Yerevan
Istanbul
GREECE
Aegean Sea
ATHENS
Izmir
ANKARA
TURKEY
Konya
Manzikert (1071)
L. Van
Van
Tabriz
Diyarbakir
Urfa
Adana
Alexandretta
Antakya
Aleppo
R. Euphrates
CRETE
RHODES
CYPRUS
Latakia
R. Orontes
SYRIA
Mosul
Kirkuk
R. Tigris
TEHRAN
IRAN
Tripoli
Homs
Tikrit
LEBANON
BEIRUT
Mediterranean Sea
DAMASCUS
BAGHDAD
Haifa
L. Tiberias
PALESTINE
Kerbala
Tel Aviv
AMMAN
JERUSALEM
Dead Sea
Gaza
IRAQ
LIBYA
Alexandria
Port Said
el-Alamein (1942)
Ismailia
Suez Canal
CAIRO
TRANS-JORDAN
SAUDI ARABIA
Basra
KUWAIT
Persian Gulf
EGYPT
R. Nile
Red Sea
N
W
E
S
Roads
Borders
Battles
0
200
400
600 km
0
100
200
300
400 miles

PROLOGUE

I was sixteen when I found out. We were going on holiday to Scotland with another family. The car was already loaded at 6.30 a.m. with everything from frozen food to an inflatable dinghy. My mother, my brother and I were standing in the kitchen, ready to leave the moment my father said, let's go, so as not to start the twelve-hour drive on a bad note – we would have to keep our nerve for his overtaking manoeuvres on the A9. Mum said almost as an aside that we were not to be surprised if we heard the other paterfamilias refer to Grandpa as her step-father – why? – because he is. 'Grandpa adopted Lizzie and me when he married Granny. Our real father was her first husband, and he died when we were very small.' And then my father said, let's go.

My world did not fall apart. I did not feel betrayed or deceived because we had not been told sooner. I did not feel as though my own sense of identity had been weakened. As the August countryside passing by in car window-sized frames gave way to the purple hills of the Highlands, I wondered if my relationship with my grandfather would change now he was my step-grandfather. I saw no reason why it should. He was the only one I had ever known – I could not remember my father's father. We were the only grandchildren he had. Even though we were not related by blood he could never be anything other than our Grandpa. The real surprise was that our mother was

not entirely the person I thought she was. I had passed through that stage of early adolescence when you think your parents don't know anything about you, and I was beginning to realize how little I knew about them. Family gatherings thereafter became opportunities to observe the newly revealed relationships at work.

John Winthrop Hackett, my step-grandfather, was a great man. He was a career soldier who had reached the rank of major at the outbreak of the Second World War. He had what they call a 'good war' and was a brigadier by the end. He had shown great bravery, receiving wounds and decorations in equal measure. As a leader he had inspired enduring devotion in his subordinates, not least because of his maverick attitude towards his own superiors. He rose to the rank of full general and commanded the British Army of the Rhine during the deep mid-winter of the Cold War. He had been commander-in-chief of the British forces in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and still featured in those IRA assassination wish-lists that were discovered scribbled on Rizla papers and the backs of envelopes bearing the new decimal stamps. He was dubbed a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of Bath. He had even been tipped for the top army job, but a frank letter to *The Times* on the ability of NATO to withstand a non-nuclear offensive, in which he asserted that Russian tanks would be in Paris in forty-eight hours, so infuriated his political masters that he was denied, it is said, this final promotion.

He was also a scholar. He had read Greats at New College, Oxford, having the precocity to complete that degree in two

years and sit the finals for one in History the following summer. It was said that he did not know which to be, a soldier or a don, and that he became a soldier in a prolonged bout of donnish absent-mindedness. Even after becoming a soldier he gained a B. Litt. for his thesis on Saladin's campaign against the Principality of Antioch in 1188. After he retired from the army he became Principal of King's College, London. It was his last public appointment. Granny and Grandpa lived in a narrow house on Campden Hill that had a security grille in front of the garden doors and a twisting wooden banister, perfect for sliding down, that I scratched from top to bottom with the buckle of my belt.

In 1975 Grandpa retired and he and Granny moved to a mill house in the Cotswolds that they had bought some years previously. It was an event that had an impact on my family too: we had to vacate the mill. We had lived there for five years, and it was the longest that we had stayed anywhere. My father was also a career soldier, a major at the time of his secondment to the Wessex Yeomanry in Cirencester, which was to be his last posting. I was six when we moved in. I had already had four different homes, three of which I could remember, army married quarters in Canada, Dorchester and Sevenoaks. While I remembered them all with affection, Coberley Mill was the best place a boy who loved woods and streams could possibly find himself. Leaving a house so old and so alive, the creaking boards below which water trickled through the old mill race, leaving the sylvan hollow in the Churn Valley was a wrench; moving into

a house on the corner of a B road in the middle of a village near the M4, surrounded by flat land, was both a shock and a disappointment. Long stretches at boarding school augmented my alienation from our new 'home'.

Visiting Granny and Grandpa was also to revisit childhood memories. At first my brother and I would leave the lunch-table early and scramble onto the oak that had fallen across the stream where we used to have our tree house, or put on gumboots and rebuild a dam with nuggets of clay. Crayfish live in the banks, trout in the pools. Later on we would sit with the adults listening to their serious talk upstairs in the drawing room, whose windows framed the big ash tree at the top of the cowslipped bank where the tyre-swing used to hang. The room itself had changed, the yarra boards covered with pale carpet, the windows double-glazed. The image of how it once had been faded quickly, but every now and again I would look out over the millpond and see myself on an oil-drum raft paddling upstream, a wartime mission deep in the jungles of Burma.

These birthdays and anniversaries, Boxing Days and Easters were always difficult occasions for my father. He may have married the general's daughter, but he was a different type of soldier. In 1944, at the age of seventeen, he had left school without sitting his Highers, grown a moustache, lied about his age and joined up. The war ended before he could be posted – 'the atom bomb saved my life,' he says – but his career did not lack active service: Palestine; Korea; Malaya. He met my mother

during his regiment's tour of duty in West Germany. Five days after I was born in 1964 he left for fourteen months, fighting insurgents in the Radfan. He was a regimental soldier by nature and did not attend Staff College, partly because of his strong anti-intellectual bias. Grandpa, battlefield commander, sought out the weakest point and attacked. Any discussion on any topic between the two men invariably ended in Grandpa correcting my father's use of English, and my father taking umbrage. He would always lose more than the argument, his composure and his temper being frequent casualties of the engagement.

'Shan' Hackett was not an easy man with whom to have lunch. We never knew what his mood would be when we arrived. We never knew what part of his memoirs, his correspondence or his military punditry he would be rehearsing that day, or how he would try to suck us into the quicksand of a discussion. Sometimes he would start right in with the barbs, like the time he asked my father, who had recently gone to work for an insurance company, 'How's trade?' as he walked through the door. Sometimes, when the approach work was slower, it was possible to avert the clash. It did no good to change the subject, as Shan needed no opening to bring up the topic again and reiterate his position, but one could harry at the margins and draw fire. We developed a variety of survival tactics. My grandmother and my brother would keep their heads below the parapet. My mother and my aunt Elizabeth sought distraction in the preparation and supply of food, although Lizzie was fond of joining the fray and

could always retreat outside for a cigarette. She never married.

My strategy was to engage, but without the irritability that made my father vulnerable. I tried not to let his corrections and interruptions either anger or deflect me. I was not always successful; one discussion we had when I was nineteen, a particularly weighty debate that centred on dukes in bathing suits, ended when I called him a mental masturbator. 'Dear boy,' he said, 'I do so enjoy our talks. They remind me of my time at university.' I too had come to enjoy our rigorous exchanges.

The only person who did not have a strategy was Susan, the only child Margaret and Shan had together, primarily because she did not seem to need one. She was Daddy's Little Girl, as the youngest daughter often is, though there was never any suggestion that this favouritism stemmed from her being his only natural child. She had her own name for him, 'Fred', and as a Christmas present from her an ordinary-looking tie with the letter 'F' repeated in a mock heraldic design was a comedic *tour de force*. Susan's husband, Andrew Taylor, a lean, urbane man, had been an officer in the Gurkhas. His career thereafter took them to Australia and Hong Kong. They separated and divorced in the 1980s, Susan moving back to London. She died of pneumonia on Christmas Day 1992.

Though married to his favourite – or maybe because of that – Andrew was no more exempt from the general's displeasure than was my father. Matters came to a head one Guy Fawkes Night, my grandfather's birthday, when the two sons-in-law felt

so insulted that they made a pact never to come to one of these 'parties' again. When the next occasion swung round my father declined the invitation, telling the general they would both have a more enjoyable day if he did not attend, and I was thrust into the front line.

It goes without saying, or rather it does all too frequently in English families, that I loved, love all these people. I was also immensely proud of Grandpa. I found exciting his talk of letters to *The Times*, of correspondence with eminent people and comrades in arms, of speaking engagements and radio interviews and the writing of forewords – I relished these dispatches from a life of the mind and of letters that was absent in my own home. He published a war memoir in 1977 called *I Was a Stranger* and though I was too young to appreciate the quality of the writing, the story it told was straight out of the war comics that passed around my school. Five years later he published a bestseller, a future-history entitled *Third World War*. It was translated into many languages, but its crowning achievement was to have been clearly visible on Ronald Reagan's desk in a *Time* picture of the Oval Office.

I Was a Stranger told the story of Brigadier Shan Hackett's experience of the Battle of Arnhem, the airborne attempt to capture bridges across the Rhine in September 1944. He was in command of the 4th Para Brigade, a force he had raised eighteen months previously. The brigade had participated in the invasions of Sicily and the Italian mainland. It made a vital contribution

to the success of the Taranto landing, taking the harbour and establishing a beach-head, but Operation Market Garden, as the plan for capturing the Rhine crossings was codenamed, was far more ambitious. It failed. The 4th Para showed great bravery and sustained heavy losses before they surrendered. Hackett had been wounded twice. The bullet in the thigh seemed the more serious, but when he reached the military hospital in Arnhem it was discovered that a piece of shrapnel had entered his abdomen and shredded his large intestine – 'two sections and twelve perforations, you know'. Grandpa still had the vest he was wearing at the time. The German doctors gave up on him, but a South African surgeon called Lipmann Kessel, who had also been captured, operated and stitched the serviceable pieces of his gut together with such skill that his life was saved.

Hackett was the most senior officer to have been captured, but as the allied forces had parachuted in without badges of rank and regiment, the Germans did not realize they had a brigadier in their custody. On the third day after his operation two Dutch resistance workers walked into the hospital disguised as orderlies, dressed the brigadier as one, and walked him out past the guards. He was taken to the house of a Dutch family where he was hidden for nearly five months while he recuperated. His strength regained, he set out for the Allied lines with another Dutch resistance worker. They crossed Holland by bicycle to rendezvous with Canadian commandos on the banks of the Meuse.

The title of the book shows what was most important to Hackett: the courage and self-sacrifice of the de Nooij family. One of the few books he had to read during his convalescence was a copy of the New Testament in the Greek of its earliest editions. The title is a quotation from Matthew, chapter 25, verses 35–6: 'I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:/ Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick and ye visited me: I was in prison and ye came unto me.'

It was not long after the memoir was published that the film *A Bridge Too Far* was released. Grandpa escaped portrayal, and for him it was the one good thing about the film. For me, it reinforced my perception of the Second World War, that the Allies were right, but that the Germans had the best kit.

One does not have to come from an army family to be aware of weapons and war from the age of about three. Boys everywhere play with guns, have toy soldiers, fight imaginary battles. When we lived in Dorchester, our war games took place in a copse behind the house and were given an added reality by the fact it had once been the site of an army post. The barbed wire still stood in places and the ground bore signs of trenches. You could easily find shell cases in the undergrowth and I once came upon some live rounds, but the best thing I found was a helmet, a proper Tommy steel helmet half covered by dead leaves. It was added to the army paraphernalia around the house, from caps and clothes in the dressing-up box, to things stored in ammo boxes

in the garage and ashtrays made from the base of a tank round.

I graduated from Dinky toys to making plastic models of war planes and gunboats, though as my father had served in armoured cars and tanks these were my favourite kits. A Japanese firm, Tamiya, made the best models and their range had a preponderance of German hardware. I do not know exactly how it came about, but I became almost obsessive about the German Panzer Mark IV tank. It is a particularly male condition, the urge to collect and complete series of things, to bring order to the world. It is a compulsion, and I had fixed on the Panzer Mark IV in my quest for perfection. Apart from the standard turreted configuration, with either short or long barrel, the tank's elegant chassis provided a most versatile armoured platform on which to mount other types of artillery – vast mortars, anti-aircraft guns, field pieces. In all there were fifteen variations on the Panzer Mark IV theme. I rattled through the ones covered in the Tamiya range, and then began to hybridize the kits. It was a phase that passed on encountering puberty and punk rock.

I never played with the models – I might have broken them. I never imagined them rolling in regiments across Northern Europe killing people. Somehow it escaped me that Grandpa had actually faced German tanks in battle. My only experience of real tanks placed them as things to be clambered over at the Bovington Tank Museum. My pleasure was in the assembly of the models, an incremental achievement of painting and gluing that brought the set closer to completion. Curiously, for a music

genre that advocated anarchy in the UK, punk records also provided a collecting opportunity in the form of limited edition sleeves and vinyl colours. Grandpa's comment on punk, that it was 'repetitive thump and whine', led both to my assertion that all music was by its very nature repetitive and to a tedious, though unharassed, luncheon for everyone else.

Our perennial discussion though centred on language. As a student of literature and modern languages I shared his keen interest in its use, and having studied both Latin and Greek I could appreciate some of his bugbears – 'logo' and 'nomad' should be pronounced with a short first vowel to accord with their Greek derivation, the 'e' of 'economy' should always be long by the same token, and 'the *hoi polloi*' was a tautology that betrayed both pretension and ignorance. He was a hard master, but he led by example. He continued to read works in both Latin and Greek throughout his life. When my Greek 'O' level came close he tutored me in one of the set texts, Book VII of the *Odyssey* which opens with the hero and his hyacinthine locks being washed ashore on Nausicaa's island. As well as speaking French, German and Italian, Grandpa had learned Arabic as a young man, and continued to receive instruction in its weak verbs into his seventies.

By the time the exam results came, I knew he was not my blood relative and I wondered if, in retrospect, there had been any clues to that fact. The only ones I could pinpoint were in talk of his own family. He was extremely proud of his Norman-

Irish ancestry, of the thirteenth-century church in Tipperary where his family coat of arms was escutcheoned on the wall. His father had emigrated to Western Australia and had left it late in life to have children; the fourth of five, his only son, being born in 1910 when he was sixty-seven. Sir John Winthrop Hackett senior died when Shan was six. He had amassed a sizeable fortune through his mineral holdings and ownership of the *West Australian* newspaper, a fortune his will stipulated would go to the University of Western Australia should his young widow remarry. She did; money thereafter was in shorter supply. Nonetheless, Shan was due to take up a place at Winchester College in England at the age of thirteen, but a severe case of glandular fever caused him to miss the intake. Instead he went to the Geelong Grammar School, near Melbourne. Maybe it was his father dying when he was still so young, or maybe it was as a result of his frequent visits to Ireland while he was at Oxford, but reconnecting with his family's history seemed to be his chief motivation for joining the army. In fact he often denied that he had ever joined the army. What he had done was quite different; he had joined his great-grandfather's regiment. And there it was, always 'my great-grandfather', never 'your great-great-great-grandfather', never 'our family coat of arms'. Appropriately, when asked to suggest supporters for his banner in the Bath Chapel at Westminster Abbey, it was Susan's deflating wit that supplied the owl and the pussycat.

I knew all this about Grandpa, and more, but I knew next

to nothing about my real grandfather and my mother had not offered much detail when she introduced me to him. The time came to ask. One of the reasons her real father was not spoken about, she said, was because he had committed suicide, and she had not been told of it until the eve of her wedding in 1961. At that point I had no conception of the matrix of guilt and blame and shame that holds the survivors. My view of the act was still formed by the notions of Romantic literature and rock and roll.

He was a German called Fritz. Fritz Grossmann, or rather Großmann. He was a hotelier in Palestine, co-owner and manager of the Hotel Tiberias in the town of the same name. My mother was three when he died and she could remember very little about him. She remembered how he shuffled his feet in the slippers he wore around the house, him going to sleep in the afternoons with a newspaper over his face. She remembered one time standing in the enclosed circular bed at the foot of a fruit tree, crying because there were ants crawling over her bare feet, and her father saying, ‘Well, just come out of there then.’ As for the reasons for his suicide, it was said he had a depressive nature. His debts were also mentioned, but no one really knew why he did it. He had borrowed heavily to build a Lido at the hotel’s private beach on the Sea of Galilee, but the unsettled situation in Palestine and the events in Europe that led to war caused the tourist trade to fall away. When war came, his Austrian-born widow Margaret, her two daughters, her sister and her mother-in-law were interned by the British authorities

together with all 'enemy aliens' in Palestine. Shan Hackett had already been courting her for some time, and continued to call on her in the internment camp. They were married in Jerusalem in 1942. Margaret followed Shan to Egypt, while the two girls stayed with their grandmother – Granny G – and went to school in Jerusalem. In 1944 they all left for England, but Granny G stayed behind in the land of her birth.

The hotel had been administered by the Custodian for Enemy Property for the duration of the war, and an Arab manager installed. I believe Granny G intended to return to her home and business when it was over, but the hotel was eventually confiscated by the new Israeli government. She lost everything. The compensation, which did not arrive until the 1960s, was of a token nature. She lived in Beirut for a number of years before moving to Germany where she died.

Most of us have grown up hearing anecdotes not just about ourselves, but also about our parents and grandparents, stories that build into a received family history, forming our sense of where we come from and who we are. Happy or sad, they make up an oral tradition to which the family continuously adds. While the telling of my family narrative was still turning up new digressions and sub-plots, the salient points I thought of as settled. It was astonishing to discover a whole section of the main story line, and such a dramatic one, had remained untold for so long, astonishing to realize I had German relatives of whom I had never even heard. My sense of self may not have been weakened,

but it had certainly been broadened.

Army children often have a problem answering the question, 'Where do you come from?' It can even affect one's national status; my brother has a Canadian passport. I had never thought of myself as anything other than English, even though I knew my grandmother was Austrian, and despite having visited our relatives in Graz I did not think of my mother as anything other than English either. It seemed absurd that her application for a driver's licence in the mid-1970s should be questioned because she had been born in Haifa.

There was all the difference in the world between being quarter Austrian and being half German. The former I regarded as a recessive element in my make-up, diluted by a generation and distant enough to be left out of account; the latter could not be so easily ignored. When I opted to study German as an 'A' level it was because I got on with its grammatical certainties. Now I knew my mother had been a little German girl called Brigitte Grossmann once upon a time, I wondered (for as long as it took to dismiss the idea) if I might have inherited an aptitude. Did she still, if ever, think of herself as German? We never spoke the language together, although she had taught me to count to ten in German when I was four years old, a time when I still spoke English with a Canadian accent. I had lost the accent quickly on returning to England, just as she seemed to have lost the command of her first language.

As I could not ignore the fact that I was half German, I

had to consider whether it ought to make a difference to my behaviour. I was not about to start cheering for Germany in a World Cup qualifier, but shouldn't I stop the name-calling 1918, 1945, 1966 John Bull jingoism? After all, wasn't it possible that members of my own family had played for the opposition in all three contests? Unlikely in 1966, but still possible in theory. Shouldn't I own up to the Germanic part of my ancestry, take on the responsibilities of being German, the guilt? The people I told seemed to assume I would, and would break the flow of a tirade against, say, what Germans do with their beach towels in Mallorca to make placatory reference to my ancestry – 'no offence', assuming their remarks could offend. I did not know enough about my newly revealed family to feel that bothered.

The subject of Fritz Grossmann came up only twice more in the next thirteen years. Occasionally a story was told about the girls' childhood in Palestine, usually as a digression from some other topic – a news item about rabies inoculation reminds my mother of the time she was bitten by a dog in Tiberias and of the long needle required to pierce the solar plexus; a picture of flat bread being fished out of a *tandoor* in Peshawar transports Lizzie to the Old City of Jerusalem. Although younger, Liz seemed to feel much more of a connection with the German side of the family than my mother did as a result of her closeness to Granny G. At one time she had been a regular visitor to our relatives there. It was after one of her visits that a folder of photocopied documents and pictures appeared in our kitchen. Among them

was the first photograph I had seen of my real grandfather.

It showed a man of medium build smartly dressed in a light summer suit and wire-rimmed glasses. The jacket is buttoned over a striped tie. The trousers have turn-ups. He has dark wavy hair and a sun-tanned face which is inclined down and slightly away from the camera so it cannot be clearly seen. In each brown hand he holds that of a small girl in a short cotton dress, white socks and sandals. Nearest the camera stands my mother, wearing the serious expression of an eldest child reminiscent of my own at the same age. Furthest away is Lizzie, peering round her father's legs at the lens. She is almost two and looks to have the potential for mischief. They stand on a gravel path edged with black and white stones. There is a bit of a lawn and a flowerbed; a rose climbs up the wall of a white-washed brick building in the background. A palm frond intrudes from the left. The picture was taken at the Lido on the Sea of Galilee, my mother said.

The only other time my real grandfather was mentioned, and then not even by name, was at a dinner in a restaurant in London. It was winter, almost a year after Susan's death, and I had been flat-sitting her apartment while it was on the market. Granny and Grandpa and Lizzie had come up for the night, something to do with the Order of the Bath as I recall, and certainly the conversation came round to one of Grandpa's favourite subjects – his ancestry and coat of arms. I do not remember exactly how it came up, or who suggested I take a more active interest in compiling the Hackett history. It was an idea that had to be

nipped in the bud and, reckoning they knew that I knew already, rather than offend with a direct refusal I said I would be more interested to find out about my real grandfather. Lizzie let out an exclamation of horror. I may have been breaking a family taboo, but it was too late to take back the words, and what with the wine and the wide open opportunity, I wanted to say more. I said that Grandpa was the only grandfather I had known and that I loved him as much as a grandson could, but the fact remained he was not my blood relation. As a consequence there was 25 per cent of my genetic inheritance about which I knew nothing and was curious, and which I could no longer deny. My interest was noted and it was said that we would talk about the matter at a more appropriate time.

The time more appropriate never did come. Grandpa's reminiscences began to stretch further back, leaving behind the smouldering issues of the Cold War and Northern Ireland and revisiting his years in the Eastern Mediterranean. One day he would be reiterating the argument he had advanced at the time, that Rhodes rather than Sicily should have been the site of the Allied counterattack in 1943; on another he would be reliving a cavalry charge against Arab irregulars, sabres drawn, while serving with the Trans-Jordan Frontier Force, and as an aside, 'that was when I first met your grandmother'. Frequently he told stories that we had heard before, often using the exact same form of words as he had on the previous telling. He was rehearsing his memoirs. He was given a dictaphone one birthday, but he did not

start to use it until shortly, too shortly, before his death.

Coberley Mill began to show signs of it's aging occupants. Tubular handles in a hospital-white plasticized finish appeared in doorways and bathrooms. A stair-lift was installed. The rituals of gathering remained broadly the same, although the bottle of champagne before lunch became New Zealand sparkling. Nonetheless, Grandpa would still produce his silver swizzle stick and defizz it somewhat. The trout in the pool below the millpond sluice grew fatter on the bread we threw them. Ducklings disappeared one by one. Dippers flitted past the drawing-room window. If Grandpa was now less inclined to argue, he was more prone to insult, and Lizzie bore the brunt of this.

The isolation that made up so much of the charm of the house came to be a liability for eighty-year-olds. The narrow lane leading down the hill from the main road arrived steeply at a bridge over a stream; snow made it impassable. If that were to coincide with a power-cut or a problem with the boiler or a burst pipe … The loneliness of the spot must have made it seem vulnerable to burglary. One day, when my grandparents were away, a gang of thieves reversed a pick-up through the heavy oak front door. To silence the burglar alarm they tore the bell off the wall and threw it into the millpond. What they could not have realized was that, ever since the IRA threats against Grandpa's life, the alarm had been hard-wired to Special Branch in Cheltenham. A rapid reaction unit had the place surrounded in thirty minutes.

In the new year of 1997 Grandpa went for a walk up the lane and was discovered sometime later lying on the verge. His balance had not been good for a number of years, but it was not clear whether he had fallen and then suffered a stroke or the other way round. He was admitted to hospital, and then to a rehabilitation centre where his recovery progressed to the point where he was able to go home. Soon after, though, he developed jaundice and returned to hospital for more tests. These revealed he had cancer of the liver.

The old soldier faded away over that spring and summer, as the Halle-Bopp comet waned. The warrior became meek, and I would push him in his wheelchair to feed the fish, or to inspect the lambs in the meadow where I had played kiss-chase as a boy with the girls from the farm in the village. He stayed at home until the end. The final phase of his illness came at the beginning of September. The last time I saw him he was yellow and swollen. His hands were puffed up and dimpled at the knuckles. His eyes were closed. His carer had said that he might be able to hear so I should talk to him, but I could not find anything to say. I sat watching his chest rise and fall as he took gulping dry breaths, between which there were interminable intervals, so long I had to wonder if he would ever breathe in again. I bent over him to tell him I loved him, to kiss him goodbye. His moustache tickled my cheek.

Grandpa often said he could start the day only if when he turned to *The Times* obituary page his was not there. What the

comment said about him depended on which camp you were in, those who thought him an egotistical martinet, and those who found in his amused take on public life irreverence and self-deprecation. The former resented being told that 'egotistical' should be pronounced with a short 'e'; for them his querulousness was merely a way of showing off that he was cleverer than you. The latter were inclined to see a certain intellectual mischievousness in his pedantry. Besides being the subject of jest, the ritual of turning to the obituary page first was for him a *memento mori*, an acknowledgement that the day would arrive when his own appeared there.

When it came, the obituaries were indeed encomious. Condensed into fifteen hundred words his public career glittered with decorations and honours. His qualities as a scholar, soldier and leader were dwelt upon. His sense of humour and approachability were mentioned in the same breath as his pedantry, or rather, to quote his entry in *Who's Who*, an interest in 'the pursuit of exactitude, called by some pedantry'. It was a fitting send-off for one of the breed obituarists know collectively as 'the Moustaches', the heroes of the Second World War. At his memorial service in St Martin-in-the-Fields Church there were five field marshals, three air marshals, and thirty-six assorted generals among the eight hundred people who attended.

Shan and Margaret were married for fifty-five years. She was his *Schatz*, his treasure. The pain she suffered during his last illness was terrible to behold; her sadness after his death was deep

indeed, and into it intruded the sublunary necessity of ordering his affairs. Before his death King's College, London, had been offered and accepted the gift of his papers. He had left an ample record of himself which was still being archived four years later, and as the papers were sorted through and boxed up, occasionally a gem would emerge. One item that caught my eye was a large Manila envelope containing the photographs and negatives he had taken while touring the Crusader Castles of Northern Syria for his thesis on Saladin. As I had an enlarger at home I offered to print them for Granny.

My father had taught me to print black and white photographs using pictures he had taken during the Korean War – helicopters and tanks in the snow, cherry-blossom time in Japan. His father, a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society, had taught him. I had become interested in old printing processes – carbon and cyanotype and gum bichromate – and in the world such old photographs portrayed, so to come across a hoard of negatives from the 1930s was exciting. That they showed an obscure corner of the world made these even more intriguing. Grandpa had occasionally spoken about this journey down the Orontes Valley on a mule, and having had similar experiences in Asia I was eager to work on the pictures.

They are not good photographs. Though Grandpa listed painting among his hobbies, had even attended art school, he did not have an eye for taking pictures and he was further disadvantaged by the camera he was using, 'a poor camera,

borrowed from a brother officer' whose bellows leaked light. The flat noonday sun deprives the scrubby hills and tumbled masonry of all contrast and bleaches the sky to a dull white. Where the ruins are substantial and well preserved, the photographs fail to capture the spirit of the place. Admittedly they were not taken for a wholly pictorial purpose, but even as illustrations they are disappointing.

Nevertheless, however good or bad they are, these were 1/60th of a second slices of May 1935 in Northern Syria. They were part of the source material for a story that had become a family legend, proof that it really had happened. I wondered what else had survived from that time, and what I could find out about my real grandfather. If such discoveries could be made about a family legend, why not a family mystery? The telling and re-telling of the events recorded in a family's oral history seldom follow the same path twice. The self-contained episodes are re-combined according to theme. Their chronology becomes obscured and the larger story fragmented. Yet I felt certain that if I could track down more concrete evidence to which to anchor the anecdotes, I would be able to reassemble these pieces into a narrative that would not only tell what had happened sixty years previously in Palestine, but also how the protagonists came to be there in the first place. Maybe I would even find out why my real grandfather had committed suicide. At the least I might find his grave.

PART ONE

Chapter One

'The East is a career,' wrote Benjamin Disraeli in his novel *Tancred, or The New Crusade* published in 1847, but just what sort of career lay ahead for John Winthrop Hackett was far from certain. His regiment, the 8th King's Royal Irish Hussars, the regiment in which his great-grandfather had served in the eighteenth century, arrived in Port Said on 29 December 1933 aboard the *Nevasa.* 'I was glad', he wrote, 'to be in the East again.' He was so glad, he embarked upon an all-night bender with a group of other young officers. They started at the casino and dined at the Eastern Exchange Hotel, before being led by 'a persuasive person in a blue dressing gown' to an unsavoury part of the town where a floor-show was staged for them in an equally unsavoury establishment. For some who served in the 'sensuous and despotic' Orient their career was a headlong one towards dissoluteness.

The first time Shan Hackett passed through Egypt he had been a serious Australian teenager en route to a place at New College, Oxford. He returned with a taste for champagne, two degrees and a thirst to learn about the world; as an officer in the British (rather than the Australian) Army he would have the chance to see some of it. There may also have been a financial motive. His widowed mother had remarried and the bulk of his father's fortune had gone to various public institutions as a result. In life

his father had been a philanthropist, but in death he was more than beneficent; his endowment to the University of Western Australia remains, in real terms, the largest single bequest to an academic establishment in Australian history. They named a wallaby after him. Shan said later that he was glad he had not inherited a fortune as it would have made him bone idle, yet the modest means left to his mother were severely depleted by the Great Depression. He may have come from 'the uppermost crust' of Australian society, but he was frequently short of money while he was at Oxford, not least because he ran with a rich crowd, and in 1931 he pledged to join the army on graduating, thereby supplementing his irregular allowance with a subaltern's pay.

He was an unlikely-looking soldier, short of stature, only five foot six, and slight, but he had a competitive toughness, resulting perhaps from his antipodean upbringing, which earned him a half-blue at lacrosse, and a physical recklessness that directed him to the biggest jumps while out hunting. He had grown up with horses, and a part of the allure of joining the 8th King's Royal Irish Hussars stemmed from the fact it was still a mounted regiment. As strong was the desire to make his name outside Australia, where, because of his father's standing, he would never have been sure that his achievements were entirely his own. He was only too aware of the burden he had inherited with his father's name. He was both proud of his family history and eager to escape its colonial confines. In joining his great-grandfather's regiment he was at once honouring his ancestry by reconnecting

with his Irish forbears and striking out for himself.

All these circumstances led the second lieutenant unsteadily to Port Said's waterfront at dawn on the morning of 30 December. His companion, a captain in the East Surrey's, was even shakier than Hackett, on whom it fell to hail a passing dinghy and negotiate a passage back to the *Nevasa.* The fisherman and his wife rowed them across the still harbour. It was so calm and quiet that the sound of a dog barking reached them from miles away, quiet that is until the captain started singing at the top of his voice, the raucous song bouncing between the hulls of the dimly lit ships lying at anchor. They paid double the agreed fare. The fisherman presented them with a crab which they gave to the sentry, who signed them in as having returned at midnight.

No amount of coffee could restore Shan for the arduous day ahead and his mood was as flat as the desert through which the train ran towards their barracks at Abbassiyya, just outside Cairo. The sand stung his eyes. The station was crowded with men from the 14th Hussars who were to leave that night and his sore head could have done without the band that led them into the troops' quarters. There was no let-up that night either as he had friends in the departing regiment and so did not get to bed until midnight. He had slept for only eleven hours in the preceding four days; the following night being New Year's Eve, his aggregate was not set to rise by much. There was a party at Shepheard's Hotel. On New Year's Day there were arrangements to be made for the start of training the following morning, after which Shan paid a visit to

the stables to see his pair of polo ponies. So ended his first three days as an officer of the Cairo Cavalry Brigade.

By the time the British took control of Egypt in 1882 the country had been ruled by foreigners for more than two thousand years, ever since Alexander the Great was confirmed as Pharaoh by the priests of Memphis in 332 BCE. Greek was supplanted by Roman rule in 30 BCE, whose centre shifted eastward to Constantinople during the fourth century CE. The Byzantines were defeated in their turn not only by a new Arabian power, but also by a new religion. The armies of Islam established a camp before the walls of the Byzantine fortress, Babylon-in-Egypt, in 641, from which the city of Cairo grew. As a province in the empires of Islam, Egypt was ruled in succession by the Umayyad dynasty of Damascus, the North African Fatimids, the Abbasid Caliphs of Baghdad, the Kurdish Ayyubids, Mameluke sultans, whose origins lay in the Caucasus and Kipchak Steppe, and finally, from 1517, by the Ottoman Turks. Even when the country did regain a degree of autonomy at the beginning of the nineteenth century it was under the leadership of an Albanian officer in the Ottoman Army, Mohammed Ali, who could not speak Arabic. His successors, first as khedives and then as kings, remained in power until 1952.

The rise of Mohammed Ali reversed the isolationism of the Ottoman era and once again the Red Sea route to India and the East lay open. The British established a coaling station at Aden in 1839, and together with the French invested heavily in

Egypt. Factories were established and irrigation work in the Nile Delta brought a million new acres under cultivation, planted with cash crops like cotton and sugar cane. With modernization came westernization among the non-Egyptian ruling elite, and an ever-increasing national debt. In the 1850s the British built a railway from the Red Sea to Alexandria to carry their Indian trade, and in 1859 the French began work on the Suez Canal. It opened ten years later, during the reign of Khedive Ismail, Mohammed Ali's profligate grandson, a reign which saw the undertaking of vast public projects. Egypt's cultivated area increased by 15 per cent as a result of the digging of more than 8000 miles of new irrigation canals; her railway network was extended by some 900 miles, and, in imitation of Haussmann's remodelling of Paris, Ismail built a new European-style quarter next to the old walled city of Cairo. The khedive declared, 'My country no longer belongs to Africa; it is part of Europe,' but to achieve this end he had borrowed £25 million at punitive rates of interest. In 1875 Ismail was forced to sell Egypt's 44 per cent stake in the Suez Canal – the British government, then under Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, bought the shares for £4 million – but it was not enough to save the country from bankruptcy the following year. To protect their interests, the British and the French took control of Egypt's finances and for a while the schedule of repayments was maintained, until European dominance and the increased level of taxation became insupportable. Ismail's policies only inflamed the situation, and he was exiled in 1879.

His son Tewfiq failed to control the upsurge of nationalist sentiment; the country stood on the brink of anarchy. A strong Anglo-French fleet was sent to Alexandria, though the French contingent withdrew in protest at the hard line adopted by the British towards the nationalist leader, Colonel Arabi. The decisive engagement came at Tel el-Kebir in September 1882 where Arabi's forces were defeated with the loss of ten thousand men. British casualties totalled fifty-seven dead and twenty-two missing. The British occupied Cairo.

William Gladstone, who had succeeded Disraeli as prime minister, was faced with a dilemma. His sentiments were naturally anti-imperialist. He had once said that it was as unnecessary for Britain to make a colonial possession of Egypt as it was for a man with property both in the north of England and the south to want to own all the inns along the way; all that the landowner required of those inns was that they should be 'well-kept, always accessible, and [furnish] him, when he came, with mutton-chops and post-horses'. Moreover, French and Ottoman opposition to the establishment of a British colony might have triggered a European war. Yet after the battle of Tel el-Kebir, the British were in possession of Egypt, more by force of circumstance than design, and despite frequent protestations that their departure was imminent their rule lasted seventy-four years.

While the undignified imperialist scramble for the acquisition of African colonies at the end of the nineteenth century was

in full swing, Egypt remained stable under the guidance of the British 'agent and consul-general', Sir Evelyn ('Over') Baring, later Lord Cromer. A former viceroy of India, he was the power behind the khedive's throne and appointed British advisers to every cabinet minister's office. He had stereotypically Victorian ideas concerning 'subject races', of which the Egyptians were one, and 'governing races' of which the British were the exemplar. He did not think it worthwhile to educate the Egyptian peasants, the fellahin, beyond the most basic level and looked to the old Turco-Circassian landlords and military classes to provide civil servants. He set about the eradication of corruption and curtailed all public works except irrigation. Within ten years, Egypt had returned to solvency, but Cromer never achieved his stated ambition: to relieve the British exchequer of the cost of maintaining a military presence in the country. The country was relieved of him in 1907, but his ideas about the native Egyptians' unfitness to rule lingered on.

The nature of the British occupation changed dramatically with the entry of the Ottoman Empire into the Great War on the side of Austria-Hungary and Germany. Egypt was still nominally an Ottoman territory, but it could not become a British one without alienating France. The compromise was to declare it a Protectorate, and then fill it with troops. Britain's main concern was to safeguard the Suez Canal, but once the only Turkish attack on the waterway had been repulsed, Egypt was used as the launch-pad for the Syrian campaign and the

Gallipoli landing, and to supply the Arab uprising in the Hejaz. The defeat and disintegration of the Ottoman Empire brought Britain new responsibilities in the Middle East – a League of Nations mandate for the government of part of Syria, and the position of Protector to the Gulf Emirates and the newly created kingdoms of Trans-Jordan and Iraq. Cairo became Britain's regional headquarters and the permanent garrison was enlarged accordingly.

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