Recovering Family History: Researching Fr. Viktor Koch, C.P.
by Katherine Koch

Behind every research endeavor lies a "story behind the story," explaining what inspired the effort and the questions that demanded answers, propelling the historian through months—or years—of investigation. My own account is an unusual one. It’s not every day that a computer science major stumbles upon a dramatic event in her family history, dives into a decade-long research project, and travels to New Jersey, Washington, D.C., and obscure German towns to learn the full narrative.

In 2003, my great-granduncle, Fr. Viktor Koch, C.P., verged on becoming one of those faces in old, yellowed photographs that family members struggle to pair with a name. I never knew that he existed. My father grew up with a vague awareness that a relative had joined the Passionist order and conducted a mission in Germany. He recalled childhood conversations about a priest who endured World War II behind enemy lines, though that was the extent of his knowledge. While visiting inquisitive family members in Sharon, his home town in Western Pennsylvania, Fr. Viktor had openly discussed life under Nazi rule and a long-awaited liberation by U.S. forces, though he neglected to mention the day he protected Schwarzenfeld’s population from enraged American soldiers who had misjudged his flock. When he died on December 15, 1955, few people outside the town knew the pivotal role he played in its salvation.

The fates were aligning to change that. In 1997, Mr. Edwin Pacoast, an American World War II veteran whom I had never met, visited Schwarzenfeld, Bavaria. While reminiscing with Frau Zita Mueller, a longtime friend who lived in the backwater town, Ed generally avoided discussing the war out of a tacit understanding that this topic revived painful memories for the German people. Unlike younger generations who viewed the war through history books and documentaries, Ed and Zita bore personal memories of tragedy and horror. On this occasion, however, they revisited that somber chapter in their lives, and Zita told her visitor about the American Passionist who had defended Schwarzenfeld when U.S. forces stumbled upon a mass grave and threatened to execute the town’s male population. Zita was only 13 years old when these dramatic events occurred. She had constructed coffins for the victims and attended the funeral ceremony.

The story entranced Ed. Upon returning to his home in Chevy Chase, Maryland, he made contacts in the Passionist order, visited the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and began researching Zita’s spiritual hero. It was his fondest wish that Fr. Viktor’s story be memorialized in a novel, or even a movie. Inspired by the film Saving Private Ryan, he composed letters to Stephen Spielberg and Tom Hanks and was crestfallen when they went unanswered. By 2003, it was clear that he lacked the energy to commit himself to a monumental research project. He packed all of his files into an envelope, addressed it to the Sharon Genealogical Society, and mailed it off in hopes of the city acknowledging its native son. Sharon historians contacted reporters at the Sharon Herald, who published an article titled, “Priest Saved Town From Destruction.” Fifty-eight years after Fr. Viktor saved Schwarzenfeld, a new generation of Koch relatives opened the newspaper and learned his story for the first time.

My father and I contacted Ed at once. His dreams of a novel inspired me: they quickly became my own, and he was delighted to pass on the torch. But even more than that, my perceptions of World War II had been shaped by years of high school and college history classes, all of which provided a mere précis of the era. By and large, the German people were Hitler’s devout followers, the perpetrators of the war and the horrors of the Holocaust—so I had learned. Why would anyone defend them? When the Americans arrived in Schwarzenfeld, was Fr. Viktor simply acting as a moral police officer enforcing the Commandments, or was there more to his story? When your kin is involved in an incident this controversial, the matter becomes personal. To me, those questions demanded answers. I had to know.

The Research Begins
My father and I have technical backgrounds, and that undoubtedly made us a bewildering new breed of independent historians. Aware of the power of the World Wide Web to share and elicit new information, we registered a domain name and I designed a web site, viktorkoch.com. We traipsed around St. Rose cemetery in Hermitage, searching for the graves of Fr. Viktor’s family members, noting birth dates, death dates, taking snapshots with a digital camera, and we obtained digital copies of records in St. Joseph’s Church. Little by little, we managed to find the puzzle pieces of Fr. Viktor’s early life and fit them together.

In May 2004, we followed up with Ed’s contacts and made our way to Union City, New Jersey, the site of the Passionist Archives at that time. (The trip served as our family’s summer vacation). To archivist Fr. Rob Carbonneau, C.P., we were likely the strangest people he’d ever seen in his research room: my father hauled in a laptop and scanner, digitizing documents, and I barely knew enough to jot down accession numbers. A computer science degree had hardly prepared me for archival research. We made up for our shortcomings with our enthusiasm for the task at hand, and Fr. Rob took us under his wing, imparting eye-opening historical and religious context to the documents we perused.

Studying a treasure trove of correspondence written by Fr. Viktor himself, we became acquainted with our long-lost relative, and the words he penned 80 years ago swiftly shattered my visions of a priest who pedantically quoted the Bible. He challenged authority when his convictions demanded it. He wheeled and dealed his way out of failure. Living under the oppressive shadow of the Third Reich, he maneuvered around rules and harsh turns of fortune with a guile and grace that left me in awe. Fr. Viktor Koch was a dynamic force, fully capable of standing toe-to-toe with an irate American commander. But still, my question remained: what compelled him to defend Germans? The answers, I realized, awaited us in Schwarzenfeld.

Researching the German Side of the Story
While corresponding with the Schwarzenfelders, it became clear that we had two obstacles to overcome. The first, as one might expect, was the language barrier. Only one of Ed’s contacts in the town spoke English, and the people we needed to reach most—Fr. Viktor’s parishioners—conversed only in the Oberpfälzer dialect of German. As computer
people, my father and I resorted to using online English-to-German translators, but we soon realized that they were hopelessly inadequate. Ed Pancoast kindly informed us, “BabelFish is letting you down” — intimidating that we'd be mortified if we knew how the program was mangling our words. As luck would have it, a higher power saw fit to intercede. We discovered that a German woman, Bettina, worked in a local bookstore, and we commissioned this godsend to help us translate and compose our correspondence. She still works with us to this day.

The second obstacle I call “the telephone effect” — referring to the children's game in which one child whispers into the ear of another participant, who then proceeds to pass on the message, and the last child in line recites the story, revealing the amusing accumulation of errors in human recollection. The Sharon Herald article that originally snared our attention depicted Fr. Viktor learning that American tanks were approaching Schwarzenfeld's borders, then emerging from a cave and unshaven, the article said. I could almost picture him sporting a beard that would impress a member of the rock band ZZ Top. My great-granduncle's story had survived through word of mouth, but by the time it reached America, the details were so contorted that they barely resembled the actual history.

We sent questionnaires to eyewitnesses in Schwarzenfeld and, given the questions we were posing, they discerned the yawning gap between the true story and our distorted understanding. In typical German fashion, they handled the situation as practically and efficiently as possible: the town mayor issued an invitation for the Kochs to attend the 60th anniversary celebration of Schwarzenfeld's salvation in 2005. A few weeks later, Fr. Gregor Lenzen, C.P., Fr. Viktor's present-day successor, sent a similar invitation from the German-Austrian Passionist foundation. Interviews with eyewitnesses would be arranged to set us straight, and the bilingual Fr. Gregor offered to serve as translator. In May 2005, my family and I boarded an Airbus to Germany — the first trip that any of us had taken beyond North America. Much to my delight, Fr. Rob and a contingent of American Passionists joined us for the celebration.

The trip to Schwarzenfeld wasn't just enlightening. It was an epiphany. As I listened to accounts from Zita Mueller, Liebharda Gindele, Josephine Gindele, Barbara Friese, and so many others, several thoughts after my trip to Germany.

As commander, he was protecting Germans who lived in a highly unusual milieu, one informed by American influences and Passionist teachings. No other town in Nazi Germany could claim to have that combination of elements, and the implications stunned me. Ever my advisor on this journey into history, Fr. Rob was eager to see me do more than pen a novel. He suggested that I consider contributing to historical journals and conferences.

Fr. Rob also shared a bit of sage wisdom that proved true in the weeks after my trip to Germany. As researchers refine their understanding of a historical incident, new questions abound. I found myself wanting a broader perspective. How could I confirm my belief that Schwarzenfeld had a unique milieu? What was the atmosphere like in other Bavarian towns during the war? During the trip to Schwarzenfeld I crossed paths with Nikolaus “Klaus” Kainz, a former Hitler Youth who hailed from Pfaffenberg, Bavaria. He had been part of a troop that happened to pass through the Schwarzenfeld train station only hours after S.S. men had executed Jews too injured to walk. He spoke and wrote polished English, and was completely impartial in his views and judgment of the town. In fact, I found him to be starkly candid about his own experiences as a Catholic boy growing up in Nazi Germany. Through our nine-year correspondence, I ran my Schwarzenfeld research through the gauntlet of his sharp mind and memories. At times he declared facts "completely unrealistic" and I changed his opinion with eyewitness testimony. Those moments excited me the most, because when they occurred, I knew that I had unearthed a unique jewel from the bedrock of history.

The good luck didn't end there. In Summer 2006, our use of technology in this project paid off when my father and I received an unsolicited e-mail through viktorkoch.com. The contact was Herta "Hedy" Arata, a German war bride who had lived in Schwarzenfeld, married an American soldier in 1947, and moved to Milford, Massachusetts. She came to Schwarzenfeld in 1943 and worked as a secretary for the Nazis who occupied Fr. Viktor's confiscated Miesbergkloster monastery. She was a native of Berlin, a Protestant who belonged to the Social Democratic Party, and her affiliations made the town's Catholics keep her at arm's length. Although she delivered mail to Fr. Viktor every day, she could tell me little about my great-granduncle. To her, he was nothing but a hand reaching out through the flower-scarf window. (Evidently, Fr. Viktor took pains to stay away from the tenants occupying his Miesbergkloster.) However, she gave me an amazingly clear sense of life in Schwarzenfeld and in the Third Reich, and like Nikolaus Kainz, she provided an unbiased impression of its inhabitants.

As it turned out, eighty-year-old Herta found our web site through sheer serendipity. Her daughter encouraged her to use a computer for the first time, informing her that the World Wide Web had information on everything imaginable. Herta thought she'd prove her wrong by running a Google search on the obscure Bavarian town where she had lived during World War II. She nearly fell out of her chair when she saw viktorkoch.com.

Researching the Jewish and American Sides of the Story

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The American side, however, proved the most difficult — and perhaps the most intimidating. It's not easy to present a story that casts the American military in a less-than-heroic light. Ed Pancoast's
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Research indicated that the units in Schwarzenfeld hailed from Patton's Third Army, and they were men who had experienced a bloody christening into warfare in the snows of the Ardennes. After researching the Battle of the Bulge, I could easily understand their antipathy for Germans. We tried to find former soldiers involved in the 48-hour ultimatum, but without success, and it was clear that we'd have to find our answers at the U.S. National Archives in Washington, D.C. We made a trip in February 2006, and Fr. Rob Carbonneau accompanied us, helping my father and me get our bearings around the place where he'd spent many a day delving into research. During that trip, we also had our first and only visit with the veteran who started it all — Ed Pancoast. (Ed passed away in March 2009, secure in his faith that we'd eventually fulfill his dream of telling Fr. Viktor's story).

The trip to the National Archives fulfilled our hopes. We found documentation identifying the exact units involved in the 48-hour ultimatum and found video footage of the reburial process. Yet, I sensed that our research in this particular arena was still wanting. We knew little about the procedures and practices of the American Army, and although we had uncovered other cases where U.S. soldiers compelled German civilians to tend atrocity victims, we had not researched them in depth. We had yet to determine how Schwarzenfeld's incident differed from the norm. Then, as if on cue, viktorkoch.com reeled in another miracle contact. In 2012, Dr. Christopher Mauriello, Chair of History at Salem State University, had found our web site through a Google search. He was researching instances exactly like Schwarzenfeld — cases where American soldiers forced Germans to confront evidence of Nazi atrocities and give the dead a decent burial. Chris's research was a perfect fit with ours — we intimately understood the German side of the story, and he had conducted exhaustive research on the American side. In September 2013, Chris and I co-presented a paper at the Midwest World History Association Conference titled, "The 48-Hour Ultimatum: U.S. Soldiers and Forced Confrontation of German Civilians in Schwarzenfeld, Germany, April '45." We have been compatriots in research ever since.

As I reflect upon the past ten years, one eerie thought occurs to me — my father and I didn't choose this history project. It chose us. Every development occurred through a combination of helpful people, unlikely circumstances, and sheer serendipity, and it could not have happened any other way. When contemplating similar moments of good fortune in his own life, Fr. Viktor was known to say, "God provides where need is greatest. Who am I to question His mysterious ways?" I can only say "Amen" to that. I can hardly predict where this journey will lead next, though I expect my great-granduncle does. Wherever the path takes us, we're certain to follow.