

Mia Swart

## **On Bonifratrów Street**

How a boy from Lwów escaped the Nazis

Based on the life of Michael Katz



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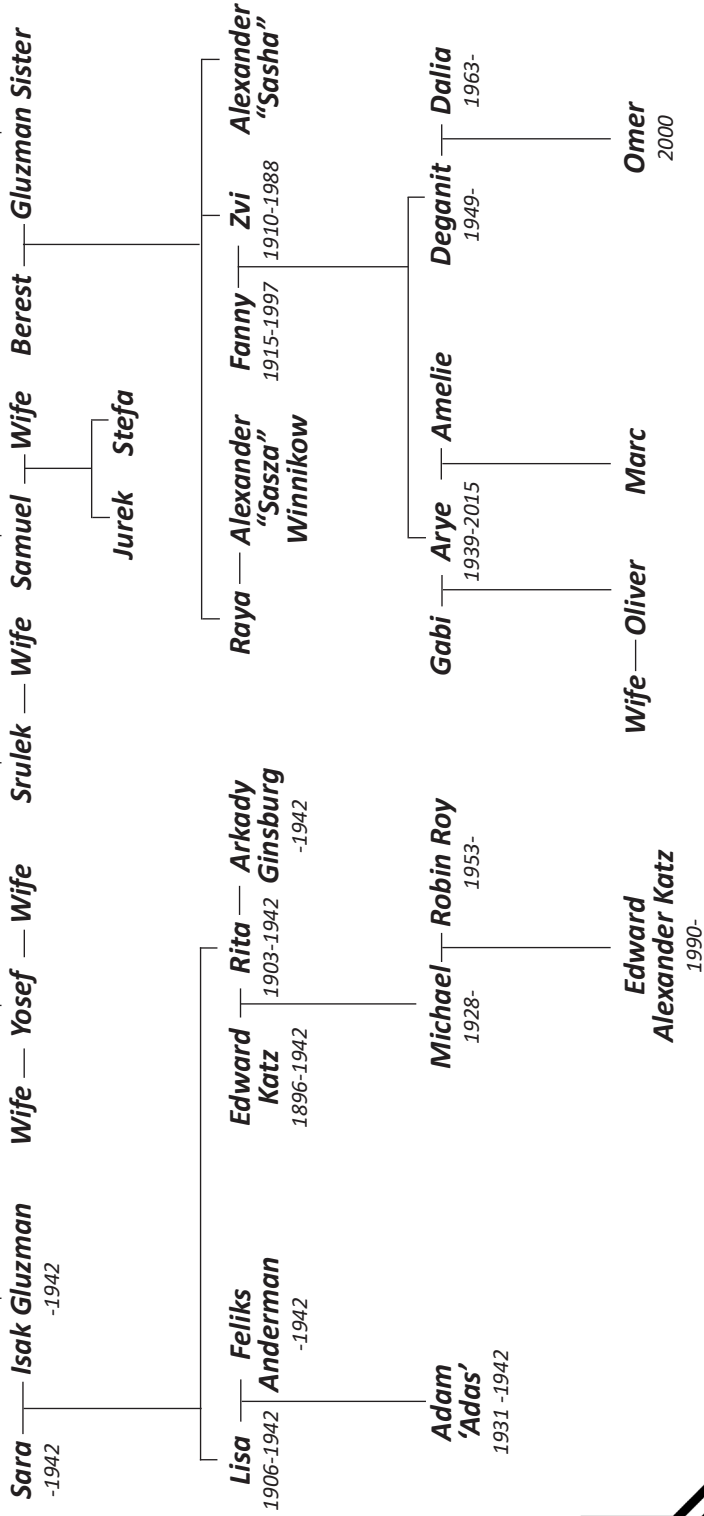
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# Family Tree

Gluzman Father — Gluzman Mother







## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I met Michael Katz in the spring of 2020. Our initial talk was via zoom. I was working for the media network Al Jazeera at the time and interviewed him for an article on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VE Day. As one of the few Holocaust survivors from Lviv alive today, he was also the subject of a chapter in Philippe Sands' magisterial book *The Ratline*.

When I first spoke to Michael, I lived in Doha and he lived in New York, which is still his home. In the midst of a pandemic, Doha felt particularly remote from the East Side apartment Michael was speaking from. As we spoke, the distance shrunk. I asked him why he was not writing his memoirs. Our conversation continued for more than three years.

I had approximately 70 interviews with Michael and the book relies on his memories. Although the historical material provides fertile ground for imagination, I tried to resist my imaginative impulses, increasingly realizing that in wartime especially, the truth is stranger than fiction or imagination. I tried to honor the gaps in his memory by leaving some events unexplained, some leads unfollowed. By taking this approach I hope to have respected the vastness of all that was lost in the Holocaust.

Born on 13 February 1928, his experience of wartime Lviv (Lwów at the time) was shaped by his youth, a secular home, his privileged economic class and a blend of luck, resilience, exceptional intelligence and resourcefulness.

When I first asked Michael how he thought he survived, he said he attributes this to his ability to make instant decisions, an ability which later helped him when he had to perform surgery. But he understands the importance of luck. The shoehorn he used to dig himself out of the concentration camp became a lifelong symbol of luck to him. He is still an avid collector of shoehorns.

I visited Lviv in late September 2021, five months before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. With the help of Enver Bekirov, a Crimean refugee, community leader and currently member of the

Ukrainian military, I searched for the places mentioned in this book.

In September 2022, I met Michael and his wife Robin in person in the town of Ormskirk, near Liverpool.

When he was a child, Michael's parents closely followed the news on the Spanish civil war. Michael remembers them discussing the plight of the victims only to enjoy their dinner straight afterwards. Michael later wondered how many people were reading the news of the plight of the Polish Jews only to continue to eat their dinner. This book is written with the hope that it would make some pause over their dinners.

## **Post-war life**

After arriving in the United States, Michael became a renowned pediatrician and expert in infectious diseases.

He graduated with an AB degree from the University of Pennsylvania, an MS in tropical medicine from Columbia University and a MD from the State University of New York. After serving two years in the US Navy as a Lieutenant Commander in its Medical Corps he became a resident in pediatrics at Babies Hospital in New York.

Later still he became the Chariman of Columbia University Department of Pediatrics, the Reuben S. Carpentier Professor of Pediatrics and Professor of Public Health at Columbia University. After becoming emeritus professor, he joined the March of Dimes Foundation as its Senior Vice President for Research and Global Programs and remained in this position for 25 years.

After reaching the age of 96, he continues to be involved in a number of these activities, but does so informally. He remains Honorary President of Maternal and Perinatal Health at Oxford University.

## **A note on names**

The city of Lviv has had many name changes. In 1772, following the First Partition of Poland, the city was annexed by Austria and

became *Lemberg*, its Germanic name. Under German occupation it was again named Lemberg, which means “city of the lion”. Under Ukrainian rule it became Lviv. I used the name Lwów, its Polish name, throughout.

Almost all Lwówian street- and place names have changed since World War II. As the city’s identity once again changed when it became part of Ukraine, the Polish street names were changed. Bonifratrów street, for example, is now Kravchika street. The name Bonifratrów means “good brotherliness”, which is similar to the meaning of Philadelphia. The cover image is of Jagiellonska street, a street in the city centre of Lwów.

The photographs of Michael’s family were mostly kept by his family members in the US and were used courtesy of the Katz family. I took the contemporary photographs of Lwów during a week-long visit to the city in September and October 2021.

## Acknowledgements

I thank Antje du Bois-Pedain, Ivan Horodyskyy, Louis Gaigher and Tali Nates for their encouragement and advice. I am deeply grateful to Philippe Sands for introducing me to Michael and for triggering my interest in the history of Lviv through his book *East West Street: On the origin of genocide and crimes against humanity*. I am also grateful for the help of Sofia Dyak of the Centre for Urban Studies in Lviv. Thanks to Jaike Wolfkamp for proofreading, Tracy-Lee Malcolm for the cover design and Michael's wife, Robin Roy, for copy-editing and other intellectual support. Thank you to Christian Schön of Ibidem Press for instantly showing enthusiasm and willingness to publish this important story.

I was inspired by the film *The Pianist*, set in German occupied Warsaw and directed by Roman Polanski, a survivor of the Kraków ghetto. I drew inspiration from *Warsaw Boy* by Andrew Borowiec, *Hitler, Stalin, Mum and Dad* by Daniel Finkelstein and Tadeuz Bór Komorowski's memoir *The Secret Diaries: The Memoirs of General Bór Komorowski*.

Since this book, in essence, is about loss, I dedicate the book to the memory of my youngest brother Cillié who died on 22 March 2023. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Michael told me that the bombing of Ukrainian cities was a painful reminder of his own wartime experience. The book is therefore also dedicated to all children who have had to listen to bombs falling at night.

Mia Swart  
October 2023  
Johannesburg

# CHAPTER 1

## Paris-Moscow Express

On the afternoon of 31 August 1939, the people of Warsaw were going about their day as if they were not about to be swept up in the hurricane of war. Shopkeepers were selling their goods, bankers were cashing checks, families were strolling in the parks.

Michael felt hot and sweaty. He was walking hand-in-hand with his father to the central train station in Warsaw, accompanied by his governess, a young Polish woman who walked with haste and determination. Her heels clicked on the sidewalk like a clock clicking too fast.

Michael would much rather not have been there at all. Seeing his father off at train stations always left him with a sinking feeling.

As they turned into Aleje Jerozolimskie and approached the station building announced with the imposing sign Warszawa Główna with its big sharp lettering, he felt that same hollowness in his stomach each time he had to say goodbye to his father. It was if the sharp ends of the W hit him straight in the stomach.



Edward Katz, 1930s

Within minutes his father would be leaving for Łódź. It was a life Michael knew very little about and he struggled to even imagine his father's life in Łódź. But they corresponded quite regularly and Michael always knew when he would see his father again. The month they just spent together in Urle in the countryside near Warsaw brought them very close.

His father, Edward Katz, had moved from Lwów to Łódź shortly after his parents divorced in 1933. Michael was but five years old. His father, a businessman working in the textile industry, found a job in Łódź quite easily. Michael heard from his mother's father that his father did not want the divorce but that his mother insisted. He did not understand why his parents took this decision. He did not remember his parents ever fighting or any tangible

tension between them. None of his friends' parents or parents' friends were divorced. His parents' separation was a very odd thing.

But the divorce belonged to the topics that were simply not talked about in their family and his mother never offered an explanation. Their divorce made him worry that grown-ups take seemingly inexplicable decisions about big things and left one in the dark about their reasons or motivations. This left one vulnerable to being subjected to something that terrifying again.

The station platform was busy. His father turned to him and hugged him closely. He was a tall man with broad shoulders and deep-set, melancholy eyes. Michael buried his face in his father's wide chest inhaling the faint smell of tobacco.

He watched his father walk away and step into the train, his broad shoulders swaying gracefully. It was a grand train, the Paris-Moscow Express. His father often took this train when he travelled between Warsaw and Łódź. His father loved sinking into the soft seats. Halfway into his journey, halfway between his old life and his new life in Łódź, he might have ordered Russian tea.

His father lowered the window of his compartment to speak to Michael. Michael said he will have to be careful because if the train's brakes fail, he will end up in Paris, not Łódź. His father laughed, then waved. The train started to move.

Michael stared at the departing train. He hoped he could one day visit his father in Łódź. He wished he could return to Lwów soon with his mother and stepfather. He wanted to be anywhere but in Warsaw. They moved to Warsaw because his stepfather, Busia was offered a senior position there. Michael never took to the city.

Busia was a suave, successful businessman who worked for the famous English tea company Anglas. His name was Arkadi Ginsburg but everyone called him Busia. He had been married once before but had no children. In 1938 he became Poland's representative of the company which meant the family had to move to Warsaw. Michael's mother married Busia shortly after her divorce. Rabbis in Poland could not marry divorcees, but with her characteristic

resourcefulness his mother found a rabbi willing to turn a blind eye and who married them.

And then Michael's governess lightly tapped him on the shoulder, interrupting his thoughts, and reminded him that he was expected for dinner at home. He walked back to their apartment on Żurawia Street thinking of his father.

## Proskurov

Michael Katz was born in the long shadow of the Russian revolution. His family moved from Russia to Poland in 1922 to escape the scourge of the Bolsheviks. The family was from the small city of Proskurov on the banks of the Bug river in the Western Ukraine region of Russia.

In the 19th century Proskurov was linked to Zhmerinka-Volochisk railway line which accelerated its economic development. The new railway line also boosted Jewish wholesale trade which turned many Jews who traded in lumber, grain and textiles to the city. By 1897 the Jewish population was 11, 411, which comprised half of the population.

Michael's maternal grandfather, Isaac Gluzman, was a businessman and his paternal grandfather, a banker. He never met or knew his father's name or any details of his father's family. They resided in what was then known as the USSR and contact with them was limited. That part of his family remained as blurry as an underdeveloped photograph.

When his parents, Edward and Rita, met through a mutual acquaintance of their grandfathers, the relationship progressed quickly. Edward studied mathematics and Rita had just finished high school. Nothing stood in the way of a swift union.

Michael did not know how his parents had met but he imagined it could have been at a social event, a dinner or a dance. His mother, a dark-haired, delicate beauty, was often the center of attention. According to his grandfather, his father had fallen in love with his mother the moment he first saw her.

Isaac Gluzman was warm, gregarious and the center of their family life. He was also tall, slim and devastatingly handsome. As



a member of the landed gentry of the western Russia whose property was violently confiscated by the Bolsheviks, he was fiercely opposed to the Russian revolution. He had been born in Brest-Litovsk and it was not clear to Michael how and why he ended up in Proskurov. In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, in 1922, he moved to Lwów with his wife, his two daughters and his brothers. He assumed that in Lwów, they would all have a better and more secure life. His grandfather told Michael that his father was very much in love with his mother and followed her to Lwów. His father, who studied mathematics in Proskurov, never completed his studies. The couple married shortly after arriving in Poland in 1922.



Wedding of Edward and Rita Katz, 1922

Once in Lwów, the family assimilated rapidly into Polish society. They moved into an apartment building in Bonifratrów street that was opposite a military hospital. Bonifratrów street was a short, tree-lined street in a beautiful old neighborhood. The family would soon speak Polish fluently but also continued speaking Russian.



Michael Katz at 15 months, May 1929

But Michael knew his grandfather was not entirely free from the Bolshevik yoke. In their family the Bolsheviks came to represent all that was sinister and undesirable. His mother's parents, who lived in the apartment just next door, would often join them for dinner. Politically his grandfather was a socialist, believing in ecumenism and social justice. But it was Bolshevism that got him fired up. His grandfather would make derogatory jokes about the Bolsheviks. Michael did not know exactly what it meant to be a Bolshevik but the Bolsheviks seemed worse than the villains in the films he sometimes saw in the cinema. But in Lwów they were safe from the Bolsheviks. His family believed this gentle city of art and music would keep them safe.

From time to time his grandfather told him about their old life in Russia but much of what his grandfather told him now seemed hazy. He remembered his grandfather telling him of the pogroms that had swept over Proskurov between the years 1918 and 1922 during which many thousands of Jews had died in the city. These were not the first pogroms in the history of Proskurov. In the 17th century the Ukrainian Cossack leader Bohdan Khmelnytsky initiated anti-Semitic massacres in the name of an independent

Ukrainian state. These massacres which were mourned by Jews as an unprecedented act of violence became a precursor to the massacres of late imperial Russia. The violence was never publicly condemned. To rub salt in the wounds, statues glorifying Khmelnetsky were erected all over Ukraine.



Proskurov, old city view, undated (Information Portal to European Sites of Remembrance)

On 15 February 1919 Ukrainian soldiers belonging to the Ukrainian People's Republic under the command of Ivan Samosenko, murdered more than a thousand Jewish civilians in Proskurov in a mere three and a half hours.

Mobs consisting of Ukrainian nationalists, soldiers, enraged townspeople and peasants went from door to door plundering and looting Jewish houses and beating and murdering Jews.

The local peasants also had weekly public executions of Jews, Catholics and criminals in the city center. His grandfather remembered days when he had avoided going out on the street in Proskurov for fear of getting caught up in the pogroms. In that February of 1919 he had had a narrow escape. There was a great commotion

in town that day as Jews were being beaten up in the street. As his grandfather was about to be attacked by a mob, he was pulled into a nearby *droshka* or horse-drawn carriage by a sympathetic coach driver. The coach driver used his whip to beat the men who attacked him and said "Leave my customer alone." He then sped off, the horses' hooves clacking loudly on the cobblestones. This was how his grandfather escaped being one of the thousands of victims of Jew-killing mobs. Approximately 1,500 Jews were killed during the three-day February pogrom.

### Country estate

After moving to Poland, Isaac and his younger brother bought an estate in the country that produced lumber in an area to the north-east of Lwów. To get there took several hours by slow train.

Michael would later long for the summer holidays they spent on his grandfather's estate. They were all together then: his mother and father, his mother's younger sister Lisa, her husband uncle Feliks and their son Adam, called Adas. Long after his grandparents moved to Lwów and sold the estate, Michael kept wishing the clock could be turned back and they could all be in the countryside once more.

They usually left Lwów at night and arrived by narrow-gauge railroad in the morning. There was marshland all around them. They would be met by his grandfather on horseback and be picked up by a horse drawn carriage, except for Michael who would ride with his grandfather, perched in front of his grandfather on the saddle. This was exciting, especially because his mother and grandmother showed their disapproval. But his younger cousin, Adas, was never allowed this privilege. It was a benign form of sibling rivalry, the closest Michael ever came to this form of rivalry.



Michael Katz, 1943

They spent their days taking long walks, picking berries and sprawling in the sun. Michael and Adas invented games which were all strictly supervised by his nanny. His mother and grandmother would sit nearby, talking, busying themselves with embroidery and other crafts. Michael later remembered these days as some of the most idyllic of his life.





Adas Anderman

The most exciting of the games was the one in which his grandfather indulged him: riding a log in the sawmill. Lumber was the estate's primary product, and as a result, gigantic logs on a conveyor belt were sliced with a large circular saw. Michael's grandfather would place him on the top of a log going slowly towards the saw, hold him, and then snatch him away before the danger point was reached. This was frowned upon by the three women who were observing it all from nearby, but they knew they had little influence on Isaac.

It was at the estate that he first saw his grandfather lose his temper. One of the servants, a young Polish woman, did not clean one of the rooms to his satisfaction. His grandfather screamed at the

young woman. She started crying and ran out of the room. Since that day Michael's love for his grandfather became tinged with a light fear. But he always loved to be in his grandfather's company. Isaac Gluzman had the kind of personality that made everyone around him feel important and who made even the mundane seem exciting.



Isaac Gluzman on his country estate, circa 1935