

THE UNFINISHED ODYSSEY

by George Perzsky

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Part 1

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Much like Homer's Odysseus my life has taken directions at the whim of fate and to some degree influenced by my own decisions and determination. To quote Shakespeare, "All the world's a stage . . . And man in his time plays many parts." As I reflect back, I have played many parts and at times have had fortune shine upon me and at other times have suffered hardship and adversity which severely challenged me as if the fates were playing a fickle game. For the most part, my life has been blessed with a loving and supporting family, wonderful friends, good health and a life of diverse and exciting experiences.

Today, I reside in Shoshone, California, a three-horse town, literally --- the local sheriff raises horses and has a small horse corral in front of his house. There is one gas station, a general store, a museum, two restaurants and a high and middle school that serves all of Death Valley. This tourist Mecca has been a home that I have shared with Mia, my soul mate and partner for the past five years. Mia has been teaching Art and English here for the past seven years and has extended her influence by exposing me to Shakespeare, historical classics, and modern literature. I, in turn, have tried to edify her in science and mathematics. My purpose in coming to Shoshone in the first place was to teach at the high school. After I taught for two years at Death Valley, I moved near Yosemite where I taught for two years and subsequently returned to Death Valley to be with Mia.

At this juncture I am at a crossroad, much like Odysseus, uncertain of the future and reminiscing the past. My life began as a refugee, a "DP," a somewhat derogatory term used by neighborhood people referring to "displaced persons" from World War II who immigrated to the U.S. after the war. We were ragged, penniless, and must have seemed primitive to the generation of previous immigrants who had established a Ukrainian enclave in Detroit's mixed ethnic neighborhood made up of Germans, Polish, Russian and Appalachians. (It always had seemed odd to me that some previous immigrants believed that we had never been exposed to flush toilets since they had come from villages where there were none.)

After surviving the horrors of the war, my family immigrated to America with great hope, believing, after all, that the roads were "paved with gold." They were greatly disillusioned when arriving at the Detroit train station which was located near skid-row to find a dirty, smog and poverty ridden city. Regardless, these immigrants were happy to start a new life after all their experiences. My family which consisted of parents, grandparents, sister, uncle and aunts had left behind memories of bombings, executions, and threat of having to become repatriated by force to the Ukraine, which was now under communist rule and where they would face certain deportation to a Siberian gulag or worse. Because my grandparents were landowners, "kulaks," and my father was politically active at college, they knew they were on a list of deportees to Siberia.

Before the war my parents had lived a middle class life in Krakow one of the historically significant and oldest cities in Poland. Both had obtained college degrees and were beginning their careers and continuing to pursue higher academic goals. My father had graduated with a law degree and had begun practicing law and pursuing business interests while studying for a doctorate in law. My mother had graduated with a master's degree in horticulture and had been working as editor for the university sponsored agricultural magazine and for the Polish government in supervising state sponsored gardening programs while pursuing a doctorate in horticulture. The war had disrupted their lives completely and had set them on a course of survival forcing them into jobs below their former status.

My life as three-old child with a baby sister and parents who were trying to adapt to a new life, learn a new language, and provide for a family brought abrupt changes from my former life which gave me constant paternal attention. Since both my father and mother were working, we were cared for by very strict and not so benevolent baby sitters. Growing up in Detroit in a working class neighborhood introduced me to the best and

worst in people. I learned that the people with the least are often the most generous. The neighborhood had its fair share of drunks, alley fights, and spousal abuse. Seeing blood gushing out, and witnessing real violence (not the glorified contrived TV version) terrified me at a young age and made me realize its consequences. The threat of violence was ever present either from local bullies or gang members. Learning to stand up for oneself or avoiding bullies was a necessary skill.

In time my parents left their first jobs (my father had worked on the assembly line in one of the auto factories and my mother had worked as a janitor) to open up a restaurant. This proved to be a "24/7" job for my parents that was not very profitable and had left my sister and I even more neglected than before. Perhaps the upside was that both of us had learned to be self-reliant.

Inevitably, my parents closed the restaurant, and my father opened a gas station while my mother used her education, as a botanist, and became trained as a medical laboratory technician. She started her new career at one of the most prestigious hospitals in the country from which she retired some twenty years later. This provided enough income for me to attend a Ukrainian Catholic parochial grade school and high school where I learned to read and to write in Ukrainian.

Throughout my formative years, family was very important to us. Our extended family celebrated every holiday and family occasion such as baptisms and anniversaries. After all our family had gone through, including the hardships of having settled into our new lives, we had bonded into a close family unit, which was very supportive of each other.

After living in an apartment above the restaurant for many years, where I got to know and made friends with a diverse group of neighbors, we bought an old turn-of-the-century home. My paternal grandparents lived with us occupying their own corner of the house. They had their own kitchen, bedroom and small dinette. For an older couple they were quite affectionate. They certainly had a lot of love for each other and were often visited by their children and grandchildren.

My grandfather was born in 1886 and my grandmother was born in 1889, so that if I had been smarter then, I would have learned their perspectives about the age they were born into and their experiences. I did have a few opportunities to speak to my grandfather about the First World War, he was a veteran, first serving in the Austro-Hungarian army, since that part of Ukraine was ruled by the Hapsburg dynasty, and later the Ukrainian army of independence. He was gone for five years and presumed dead since no word was heard of him. One day he arrived at the doorsteps; needless to say everybody was surprised and grateful. I'm sure the celebration lasted a long time.

At that time I was of grade school age and had a "John Wayne" image of war. My grandfather was not interested in discussing the war and as far as I know never really discussed it. He made it clear to me that wars are not glorious and that it is the most horrible activity people engage in. I learned more from my grandmother who described the occupation by Russian troops and from my father who shared information about his experiences. He was probably my grade school age at the time. For a young boy his experiences were horrid. For instance, he witnessed the execution of an accused spy by slashing with swords. Eventually, my "John Wayne" image of war changed.

Before I knew, I had graduated from high school and had begun attending one of the oldest community colleges in Michigan now located in an Afro-American neighborhood. For whatever reason my high school years lacked academic dedication which I made up with a robust social life, so that I was very grateful to get a chance to attain a college education. This has been one of the major turning points in my life. I dedicated myself to my studies, got good grades and expanded my social horizons befriending people of all races, religious persuasions, and backgrounds.

"The times they were a changing"---to paraphrase Bob Dylan's popular song --- is a good description of the mid-1960s. This was a time of war, a time of social changes, and a time in which old values were questioned and new values introduced. The pill made it possible for women to experience sex without fear of pregnancy, and it was as if people had discovered that sex existed for the first time, and Masters and Johnson had become popular sex experts.

I was living in a racially divided city, attending a college where a good percentage of the student body was Afro-American, facing the prospect of getting drafted for the Vietnam War, and witnessing great social turmoil.

Black anger was simmering at the surface, and many of my conversations with black students in my classes gave me their perspective. They would describe their feelings of fear and discrimination when going out of their neighborhoods. When traveling into northern Michigan, a sparsely populated and wooded area that is a

popular vacation destination, the Afro-Americans often found themselves isolated and discriminated against and unable to find accommodations or help when in need.

At almost every encounter of their lives, blacks were subjected to embarrassment and denial of entry or service. I witnessed this discrimination in my own church. Rather than welcome a black woman, who came into our church during Sunday services, one of the ushers asked the lady to leave. This was a typical response, one that hardly exemplifies Christian virtue. On the streets, I was exposed to derogatory language and attitude toward blacks as well as Jews and other ethnic groups including Poles. This was somewhat ironic since many of the prejudiced people I was exposed to most likely had some Polish heritage so that the church incident should not have been surprising.

At home my parents' attitude was quite different. They were tolerant and respectful of all people. For instance, my father befriended black workers at his assembly line job and had good relations with the Jewish merchants with whom he dealt in his business activities. My mother was equally tolerant and respectful. They had witnessed the Holocaust firsthand, had been labeled together with Jews, Gypsies and other Non-Aryans as "untermensch" (subhuman) who had also felt discrimination during the war years. Undoubtedly, this had taught them about the evils of prejudice. Their attitudes must have rubbed off on me.

It was quite ironic that at school I had learned that the black students saw themselves as not only of African descent but could trace their descent from German, Irish, or some other ancestry. The popular perception that they are all alike did not hold. Every individual is unique with his or her own characteristics. My experience at the school was yet another turning point of attitude and this brought the realization that we, all as human beings, are much more alike than different. It taught me not to judge people solely on socio-economic status or stereotype but instead to look deeper into values and character.

In the summer of 1967, black anger turned into black rage. Prior to this time, the common thought was that Detroit was a city where African-Americans were given a fair shake and that we were immune to racial riots that were prevalent across the country. How wrong we were. The riots began from an incident on Saturday night with the police. Protest soon escalated into full scale riots on Sunday with stores being ransacked and torched so that when we got the news of riots in Detroit it was evening; we were in a park fifty miles away. The choice was either to stay in the park or to go home. My parents decided to go home not knowing what to expect.

One of my friends at the park who rented an apartment near Wayne State University, very close to where the riots originated, came to stay with us. As we approached the city, it was already dark, and an unforgettable sight lay before us. The city was ablaze as if we were watching the scene from *Gone with the Wind* where Atlanta is burning. The closer we approached our neighborhood the more we could feel the heat from the fires and hear sounds of gunfire. It was a very scary moment not knowing what lay before us. Could we become victims of a sniper or random shooting, was the neighborhood safe, was our house intact? All these questions raced through our minds as we drove into the neighborhood and reached our home.

Fortunately, the home was intact and we spent the night on edge occasionally awakening to gunshots at a distance. The morning was tense, nobody got a good night's sleep, we were eager to hear the news and respond to the situation. Officially, forty-three people had been killed.

At the time, I had a summer job working at the frame plant in the River Rouge complex of Ford Motors. My job was to smooth out welds on car frames and place them back on the assembly line. After eight hours of lifting I was very sore and tired, and it took several weeks to get my body accustomed to the work. Besides the pay and strengthening my body, the monotony of the job gave me an extra incentive to study. The majority of workers at the plant were black, and there was a fear that the riots would spill over into the workplace; so, I was relieved when I heard that the plant would be closed.

As the day progressed my friend and I became bored staying at home, listening to the news and hearing sirens of police cars and fire trucks. At this point of the riot, the National Guard was called so that we could see army vehicles racing through streets; we even saw an army tank. We decided to venture into my friend's apartment to see if the apartment was still standing, and to get a first-hand look at the core of the riot.

The streets seemed deserted as we drove closer and closer to the apartment area. A blood-stained sidewalk at a bus stop brought the realization that the situation was indeed dangerous, and we felt some sadness that some poor and innocent soul may have been a victim of random violence. We drove on, reading the graffiti on a nearby building: "Soul Brothers- Soul Power." Then, suddenly a car full of black youths drove right at us. Momentarily, we were stunned and prepared for an altercation. The car drove past us and the occupants were waving their fists at us shouting, "Soul Power." The city was in a state of anarchy.

Chaos was about us. The police paid no attention to people pushing a shopping cart of apparent looted goods; no doubt they were busy attending more pressing problems. We arrived at the apartment building to find it quiet without a soul to be seen. We left the car outside the building so that we could keep an eye on it, which was ludicrous because we could do little if a group decided to topple and burn it.

As we entered, we encountered a few people peaking out their doors to see who was entering the apartment building. They immediately informed us to be aware that a sniper had been shooting from one of the rooftops, mostly taking shots at the police station that was nearby. Luckily, there was no shooting while I was there for the rest of the day and night.

The question still remains as to whether or not the riot was a spontaneous event or an organized insurrection that challenged police and authorities. Were these people in revolt because of all the injustices and strong-arm tactics that were perpetrated upon the black community over time? The targeting of police stations and the rapid escalation of rioting would indicate that an element of organization was most likely involved.

The riotous situation lasted almost a week, federal troops were called, road blocks were established, prohibition of liquor sales was instituted, a local paper ran a story of a woman claiming that it was the first time she saw her husband sober in twenty years, and eventually factories were reopened.

My first day back on the job was a stressful one, and I was not sure what to expect. The plant was half empty and the workers who did come to work also exhibited some stress while the supervisors were reorganizing work assignments in an effort to be productive and to establish an orderly routine. Many of the stories I heard from the black workers gave me the realization that they had some harrowing experiences and were glad to get the riot behind them. Was this a turning point for me? I'm not sure, but it did reinforce the fact that unfair and bigoted practices festering in the hearts of the oppressed eventually may surface in an explosive manner.

Over time, my odyssey has taken many turns. Shortly after graduating from college with a bachelor's degree in economics and biological sciences, I got a job as an economic analyst for the state of Michigan. Not being satisfied with a bureaucratic existence at the time, I quit my job, and soon after that I found myself living with my mother on a farm that needed lots of renovation. I then attended the local university where I earned a master's degree in economics. Later in life I got married (divorced), traveled throughout Europe and the Middle East with my wife of Palestinian birth, and became experienced in many world cultures.

Traveling from country to country the ghosts of the past followed us. In the Middle East as we enjoyed museums, nightlife, ethnic foods and hospitality of the people; we encountered biases and hatreds that have perpetuated atrocities and war in that part of the world. In Lebanon, the aftermath of a civil war that pitted religious factions (Christian, Muslim, and Druze) against each other was evident at every turn: rubble from bombed buildings, an unexploded bomb in a building that no one wants to disengage, and being informed that a massacre took place here and another perhaps revenge massacre took place somewhere else. The cycle of violence and the extent of death and destruction were still very evident after ten years had passed after hostilities had ceased.

In Israel, the state of war greeted us from the beginning of our visit. We crossed over to Israel from Jordan at the General Allenby Bridge (British Administrator in the Middle East during WWI) where we boarded special busses that traversed around minefields and machine gun turrets. Our visit included traveling in both Arab dominated and Jewish dominated areas and had reaffirmed my perception of a country divided. The disparities of wealth and opportunity between the two could not have been more evident. Ultra modern buildings, well-paved highways, and lush farmland of the Jewish areas contrasted like day and night to drab buildings, unmaintained, pothole-ridden roads and subsistence farms of Arab areas. I recall the momentous site of the viewing of the commemoration of the ship "Exodus" that had brought many holocaust survivors into Israel. Little did I realize that I would be traveling through Europe a very short time later to be met with the aftermath of World War II.

In Ukraine, as I visited my father's home village, my first stop was a war memorial. There I read the names of fallen soldiers of the village from World War II. To my surprise I found among the fallen were some with my family's surname. I later visited my father's cousin who informed me who they were. One them was her brother whose portrait was prominently displayed in her living room. He had decided to stay when asked by my father to join him on my family's exodus to the west. He was conscripted by the Soviets and perished at the siege of Warsaw. The other name on the memorial was another cousin who perished somewhere in Lithuania.

My aunt informed me of a memorial in Israel to the parish priest who created a network of people during the occupation by the Nazis and who had hid Jews from the Nazis. She told me that my grandparents were involved and that they had hid and had claimed a Jewish girl as their daughter. If they were exposed, the Nazis would have executed the whole family. I cannot think that taking on such a moral stance is the most supreme

decision an individual can take. While I am very proud of my grandparents, I at the same time question my own fortitude. Could I have been as moral or courageous if faced with such difficult moral challenges? In comparison, I feel that my challenges pale in comparison. In some ways, this is a turning point or at the least a moral compass guide for me to live my life as exemplified by my grandparents.

My aunt took me to the family cemetery where I got a lesson on family history and visited the gravesite of generations past. Not far from the cemetery was what she called the black road. At the end is a mass gravesite of Jews and prisoners of the Nazis who were taken down the black road to their end. Many places in Eastern Europe have their black roads and mass gravesites. This impressed me the most when we inadvertently came upon "Treblinka," a concentration camp in the forested area of Eastern Poland. There, a mass memorial was erected to the victims who passed through this place of horror; remnants still remain of the camp.

One of the most memorable experiences in my travels in conjunction with World War II was my visit to Berlin. On my visit to the Brandenburg Bridge we encountered two memorials. One was a memorial to the Soviets, a statue of a Soviet soldier commemorating the sacrifices made in overthrowing, in their words, "the fascist." The perspective of war derives from who are the heroes and oppressors, and on which side fate places us. In chaos, hatred and revenge-driven violence, all involved are capable of atrocities and the killing of the innocent. If the Nazis would have won, a statue of their soldier commemorating the sacrifices in overthrowing in their words "the communist" may well have been erected.

The other memorial was an anguished portrayal of a woman with a dead child crying out in her anguish in German, "peace, peace, peace." The cost of World War II and all wars is the pain, destruction and loss suffered by everybody. Have we learned or do we still perpetrate attitudes that permit governments to take us on a path that perpetuates genocide, oppression, and mass destruction? Ignoring justice for all, demonizing, fear mongering and subordinating others perpetuates this curse.

Have we learned that we are all one? I hope so, or do we still have a "them and us" mentality; I hope not. The appreciation of the diversity of us, humans, and mutual respect for each other is what we should all embrace. Reading our own and world literature, appreciating the arts of all people and finding common ground is creating a new world order that is instilling, hopefully, a new generation that is less concerned with borders and more concerned with the challenges that face us all.

As a teacher I have taught at the community college and high school level, and throughout my life I became familiar with students and individuals of various socioeconomic groups, sexual orientation, religious, ethnic and racial diversity. It certainly enriched my life to have had the opportunity of befriending such a variety of people. As a final note, since I cannot say it better, I have elicited the words of Shakespeare:

O, wonder!

How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beautiful mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in't

(The Tempest, Act 5, Scene 1, 184–187)

To be continued . . . a journey into history

This Peretsky journey speaks to violence, horror, and survival in today's world but shares memories of even greater tragedy from World War II in Europe's Nazi and Russian regimes the result of partitions perpetrated in World War I. Their turning points haunt us as they share the lessons history should never forget.

Family pictures follow. Also see George Peretsky's poetry and art under feature poet/writer tab.



1958 photo of 50th wedding anniversary celebrated with Peretsky family at St. John's Ukrainian Catholic Church, Michigan. Two parish priests seated at table with George's grandparents (center at table). Young George Peretsky (age 10) is 2nd from right at table.



Antin Peretsky j, George's grandfather from World War I.



Olena Peretsky j, George's mother as a young woman, born 1909, Lviv, Ukraine. She earned a masters degree in agronomy.

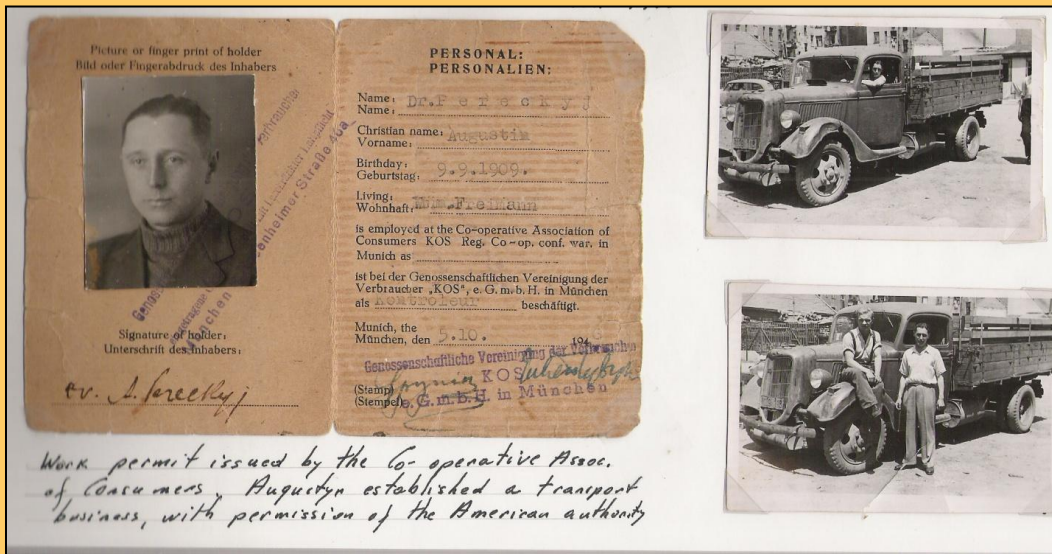


Augustyn Peretsky j, George's father as a young man, born 1909. Augustyn met Olena at Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland where he earned his law degree.

Munich driver license issued 1946 to **Dr. Augustin Perecky j** (George's father).



Munich work permit for a transport business issued to George's father, **Augustyn Peretcky j.**



Stay with us for parts 2 and 3.