

Crossing the border, sight unseen, into the cruel past



MY JOURNAL SUZANNE LEAL

MY book *Border Street* was published in August last year. Although a novel, *Border Street* is based heavily on the wartime experiences of my former landlord Fred Perger, who was born in Prague in 1923.

Fred and I lived next door to each other from 1993 to 1999. During that time we became friends; we argued about politics and religion and he told me stories. He told me how, for example, at the age of 21, he found himself on a train with no seats and no windows, just a small slot through which to look at the passing landscape.

It had been a long journey on this train, a number of days, when finally it pulled up at a platform. Screaming "Raus!", a German officer opened the door of the carriage. "I received a push with the butt of the officer's rifle. And so I found myself in Auschwitz."

Fred's stories, told with photographic recall and sometimes too much honesty, gave me the blueprint for my novel.

Border Street is in part a Holocaust story from a Czech perspective, a perspective that remains relatively unexplored. It is also the story of an unlikely friendship between a young tenant and her ageing landlord.

I spent hours interviewing Fred and many more hours transcribing the taped material. Most of Fred's stories were about places I had never seen. By the time *Border Street* was published and despite my best intentions, I had not travelled to the Czech Republic or Poland.

In January, however, I achieved my aim and spent three weeks retracing Fred's wartime journey. I made this trip for a number of reasons. I wanted to see whether I'd made a mistake in writing a book based on oral history without being familiar with the landscape. I also thought I owed it to Fred to do the journey myself. I had expected him to provide me with a detailed account of all his wartime experiences, even those that had been particularly difficult. I had probed and questioned and sought clarification of distressing events. If nothing else, I reasoned, I should at least take some time to see the places he had described.

And so I found myself at the train station of the Polish town of Oswiecim, which was, for a period

of its history, known as Auschwitz.

It was a pretty walk from my hostel to the camp, the frost on the ground crackling under my feet. There being no footpath, I walked along the road. Opposite me was an open space with bare winter trees; the rising sun was golden, the sky a soft pink and orange. A woman passed on a bicycle, her face, broad and wrinkled, squashed into a scarf tied around her chin. Beside me, branches of bright red rose hips grew up a telegraph pole.

I would not have expected the road to Auschwitz to be so beautiful. Nor would I have expected its entrance to be an enormous parking lot. Opposite the entrance was a sprawling shopping area: restaurants, an internet cafe, a newsagency, a souvenir shop.

I stood near the train tracks of the camp and tried to imagine the arrival of a transport in October 1944. I knew this particular transport well. Over coffee with Fred in 2001, I had been confronted with the odour of urine and faeces that had emanated from the overcrowded carriage. I had seen the look of disgust on the face of the guard who had opened the carriage and watched its contents spill out on to the platform. I had seen the lines forming on the platform as the SS doctors picked over the new arrivals.

But in January 2007, the platform was clean and empty and cold and I had to screw up my eyes to place myself in Fred's memory. I struggled to see in which direction the people had been sent: those selected to stay and those to be killed in the nearby gas chambers.

I hurried to catch up with the group led by an English-speaking guide through the gates marked Arbeit Macht Frei and into one of the former barracks. Inside was a room filled with victims' hair, intended to be made into fabric to line suits. In another room, piles of brown suitcases were labelled with names and painted transport numbers. Yet another was filled with the clothes of the long dead: babies, children and adults. By the time I reached the room of shoes, I no longer had the energy to be shocked.

A story brought me back as we passed the wall of death against which inmates had been lined up and shot. Sometimes, if the numbers were small,

time would be saved by shooting the victims while

they undressed. Such a story allows you to imagine the fear that must have suffused the inmates, among them the 21-year-old Fred.

“You went there,” Fred said simply when I returned home. “And so now you know it.”

But of course I didn't really know it. First, so much of the camp had been destroyed before liberation that it was difficult to visualise what it had been like when Fred had been there. Second, so much had been added — the parking lot, the shops, the restaurants — which acted to normalise the abnormal.

For these reasons, I think it would have been a

mistake to visit Auschwitz before writing *Border Street*. The Auschwitz I visited stands as a memento of the madness and a memorial to its victims. But it cannot reproduce the reality of life there 60 years ago. It does not have the smells and noises, the panic, boredom and uncertainty that were captured for me so vividly through one man's memory. In such a situation, oral history provides potent imagery that goes beyond what the observer may see.

Suzanne Leal, the author of Border Street, will be a guest at the Sydney Writers Festival.

