

Liberation on April 29, 1945 for hundreds of Jews held at Dachau concentration camp.

INSPIRED BY Holocaust survival stories

The Deceptions is a book of love, betrayal and secrets set during World War II. Sydney lawyer and author **Suzanne Leal** explains how it was inspired by the experiences of a Holocaust survivor.

FOR my career as a writer, I credit my former landlord, Fred Perger, who provided me not only with a roof over my head, but also with the stories that would form the inspiration behind both my latest novel, *The Deceptions*, and my first novel, *Border Street*.

I was just out of university when I moved from inner-city Sydney across to the beachside suburb of Tamarama. The rental property was newly advertised and not expensive. But there was one catch: it was a duplex and my boyfriend and I would be sharing with the landlords.

We lived next door to Fred and Eva Perger for six years. They were Czech

Jews who had survived the Holocaust. Some years later, Fred agreed to tell me his wartime story, a story that had taken him from the Theresienstadt ghetto outside Prague to Auschwitz and Dachau.

In giving me this story, he revealed more to me than he had even to his own family. Perhaps it was less

painful to tell a trusted (non-Jewish) outsider than a cherished child. For over a year, I spoke to Fred about his life, particularly during World War II. These interviews, which I later transcribed, would provide the foundations for *Border Street*, which was published in 2006.

Shortly afterwards, Fred died. The following year, Eva joined him. How I missed them!

A decade later, I returned to those interviews I had transcribed and found another story, one that would provide the inspiration for my latest novel, *The Deceptions*.

As teenagers, Fred and Eva – together with their families – had been sent to Theresienstadt. They were more fortunate than many, because Eva's father, Dr Franz Fischer, was a doctor whose skills were in great demand in the ghetto. For this reason, he and his family – including Fred – had been promised protection from transportation.

The ghetto was guarded by Czech gendarmes. One day, when a gendarme broke his arm, Dr Fischer set it in plaster. To thank him, the gendarme offered to smuggle correspondence out of the ghetto for Dr Fischer and his family. It was an excellent arrangement that might have lasted indefinitely, had the gendarme not been accused of Rassenschande –

or race shame – for his illicit relationship with a Jewish inmate.

During the interrogation that followed, the SS found Dr Fischer's name in the gendarme's notebook. Soon afterwards, Dr Fischer was taken to a political prison adjacent to Theresienstadt and, after the war was over, never returned home.

The gendarme and the Jewish woman said to be his lover were both arrested. While the gendarme returned home after the war, nothing was known of the woman or her fate.

Since Fred and Eva's death, I had kept up a friendship with their daughters, Helena and Renata, and I got in touch with them to discuss my book idea.

To understand my characters better, I searched for whatever information might help me. Much of it was in Czech, so I turned to Helena for help with translations.

She had recently returned from her first trip to Dachau, the site of her father's liberation. On entering the memorial

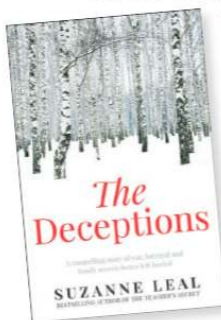


Family photo of Fred and Eva Perger and their daughters Helena and Renata in Prague in 1954.

site, she had been startled by a wall-sized photograph of the camp's liberation: hundreds of inmates staring out at her from behind barbed wire fences.

One face had jumped out: a tall, fair-haired man with prominent ears. Her eyes had widened in recognition. My father, she thought. Then she had hesitated. For how could she be sure, especially as he was no longer alive to confirm her belief? She requested a photograph from staff at the Dachau Memorial Site and one was sent to her. She brought it out to show me.

"I would say it is him," she said, point-





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Author Suzanne Leal.

Photo: Adam Yip

ing at a man in the foreground, “but I cannot be completely sure.” Her voice was soft as we peered through a magnifying glass.

I had not known Fred as a young man, and although there was something about him that seemed familiar, I could not help her.

He was simply an emaciated inmate who, like those around him, was wearing a striped uniform. There was nothing to help us identify him.

Or was there?

“Wait,” I said, a distant memory finding its way back to me. Scrolling through my documents on my laptop, I found what I needed: my transcription of the interviews I had conducted with Fred so many years earlier.

In answer to a question about Dachau, Fred had told me: “After having been captured after my escape from Kaufering, I had on my chest and back a large red circle, a so-called Fluchtpunkt, escape dot, signifying an individual who already tried to escape. In Dachau it disintegrated, so I tore it away and nobody noticed – it was really the last stages [of the war].”

My heart pounding, I looked back at the photograph – we both did – each of us again peering through the magnifying glass. I looked closely, just in case I was wrong. But I was not.

Unlike the men around him who had stars or circles or triangles sewn onto their pockets, this man – who would soon become Eva’s husband, then Helena and Renata’s father – had no pocket at all.

The Deceptions by Suzanne Leal
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