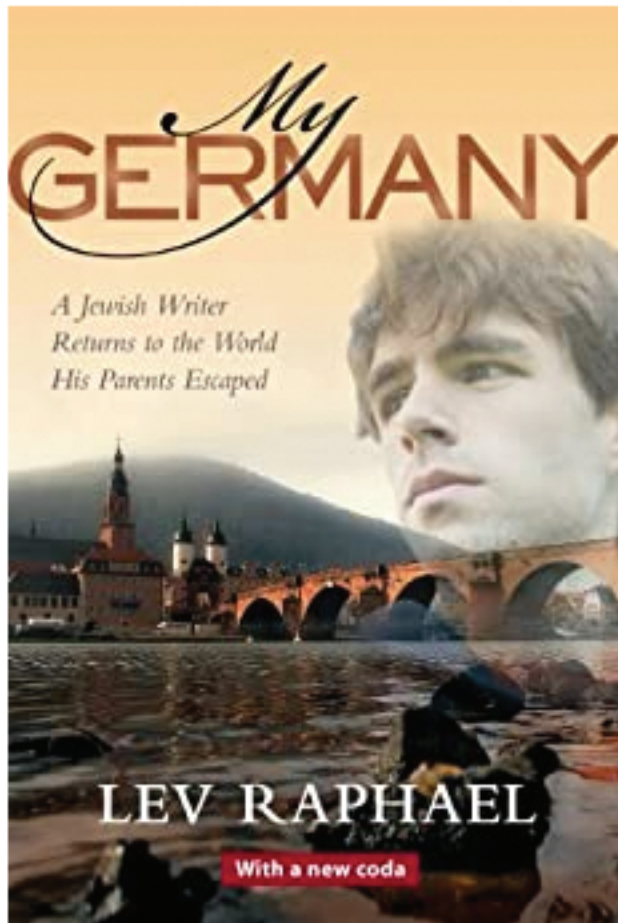


Featured Interview with Memoirist Lev Raphael



Raphael, Lev. *My Germany*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009, 224 pages.

Writing the Past (WTP): When and how did you first discover you were a writer?

Lev Raphael (LR): I was in love with books and storytelling from second grade on, but what changed my life was a fifth-grade report about Martin Luther King, Jr. that went on display at the local school board. I felt recognized and honored. My writing was *public*, not just something my parents and my teacher read. I think that was the start of my career, in a way, or thinking of writing as a career.

WTP: What propelled you to write [My Germany](#)?

LR: Writing any book is a journey and this one was strange. I wrote a book about the influence of Germany, real and imagined, on my Holocaust survivor parents and on me as their son. But that's not where I started. I intended to write about the five years after the Holocaust when my parents lived and worked in Belgium and were very happy there in a network of survivors. But the theme of Germany itself slowly emerged over the course of interviews with their friends and archival research in Germany and Belgium.

WTP: What were the challenges? The satisfactions?

LR: I had to track down elderly people who knew my parents in Belgium, brush up my French to contact any number of sources over there, and study German to feel comfortable when I traveled to Germany. Not everything went quickly because it wasn't all done via email, so I had to be patient. I also had to let the book take its own natural, logical shape, and that required patience too.

I love research, so everything connected to the book was deeply enjoyable and I met amazing people along the way, including my mother's favorite pupil at the Yiddish-language school in Brussels--who was in Australia. I recently published [an essay](#) about meeting her there:

It was deeply moving to interview my father and have him finally open up to me about his experiences in the Holocaust. I also understood his life after the war much better and admired both my parents for starting over twice, once there and again in the U.S.

And the book garnered me two German book tours sponsored by the US State Department and a [Jewish Book Council Tour](#). I did over 50 invited readings from it, including some in German. I haven't had a book ever put so many miles on me.

WTP: Were there any surprises?

LR: Lots of them, yes. I went to the Bad Arolsen archive in a scene I describe in the book because they had records from many camps and I actually held (in a plastic cover) the form filled out by some functionary when my mother was "processed" into Buchenwald. It said she was married to someone (before my father) whose whereabouts were unknown. It mysteriously listed her as a "political" And she had to sign an oath that she was that she was telling the truth in response to the questions or be punished. Crazy, right? Her handwriting was what I remembered: big, bold, beautiful and felt like a proud declaration of her humanity in the face of horror. Readers will find other surprises.

WTP: What are the three most important factors to writing memoir?

LR: I think people sometimes confuse memoir with biography. A memoir isn't a whole life, it's about a theme in your life or a specific period of time. There are limits to what you cover. That's one thing. Another factor is realizing that we can't perfectly recount every detail, for instance, of a scene. We need to strive for the emotional truth while trying to be as accurate as possible about anything that can be researched. Lastly, it's important to write it all down without worrying about who might be offended. You can always edit later on.

WTP: Who are your favorite authors?

LR: So many! In memoir: Joan Didion, Lois Gould, Susanna Kaysen, Patti Smith. In thrillers and mysteries: John le Carré, Alan Furst, C.S. Harris, Martin Cruz Smith, Laurie King. In contemporary fiction: Alice Adams, Philip Roth, James Baldwin, Olivia Manning, Don DeLillo, Pat Barker, Aharon Appelfeld, Anita Brookner. In classic and European fiction: Edith Wharton, Anthony Trollope, Zola, Balzac, Joseph Roth.

WTP: What's next for you?

LR: I'm currently finishing a novel about the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors who suddenly has to contend with the anti-Semitism she had always been able to avoid.

For more about Lev Raphael, please visit [his website](#).