

JESPER CLEMMENSEN

AUSFLUGSFAHRKARTE
UDFLUGTSBILLET
Kind - Barn 1,50
Warnemünde - GEDSER
und zurück 4. Juli 1960

ESCAPE

FROM HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS TO PRISONERS
BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN: THE SAGA OF TWO FAMILIES'
DRAMATIC ESCAPE TO DENMARK



LINDHARDT OG RINGHOF

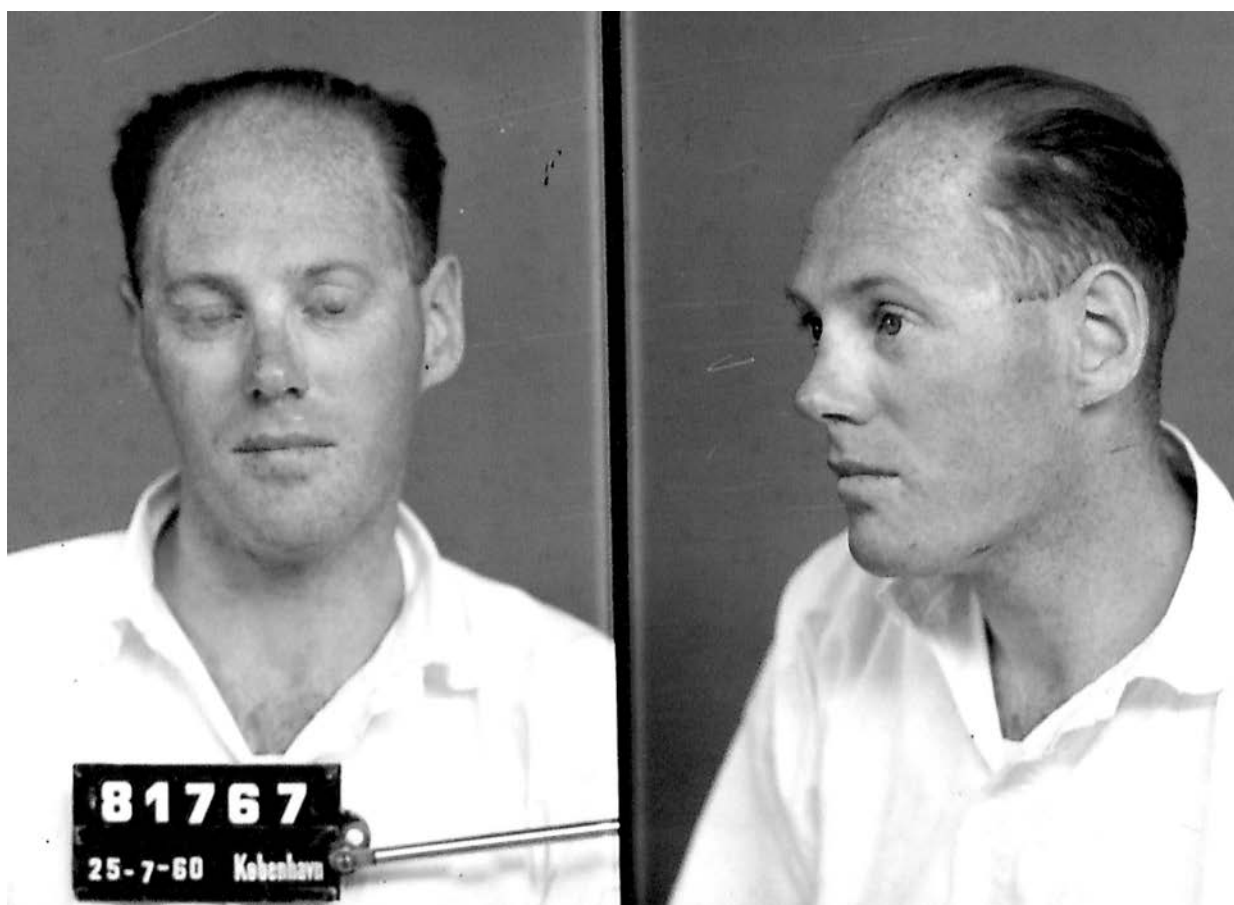
These are photographs from *Uprchlíci*, the Czech translation of Jesper Clemmensen's Danish language *Afhopperne*. The Danish, Swedish, and Czech versions have these photographs, but the publisher did not include them in the English or German language versions. I have added the captions primarily by translating from the Czech version. Where no caption was provided, I describe what the photographs show; in these cases I have put the captions into square brackets.

Tom Rocek, 2025

Prologue



[Stolpersteine during their installation September 6, 2019]



[Police mug shots of Jan Rocek in Copenhagen, July 25, 1960]

Part 1: 1924-1945



[Swearing-in of SA-Standarte 52 on the Old Town Square in Prague {News Photo, Getty Images}]



Jan's parents Hugo Robitschek and Frieda Löblová.



Jan with his sister Helga. Photograph from 1936.



Sudeten Germans greet Hitler in Carlsbad in October 1938.



Persecution of Czechoslovak Jews began immediately after occupation of the country by the Nazis. The photograph shows a call for a boycott of a Jewish store in Prague



Arnošt Reiser, his sister Zuzka, and brother Jan.



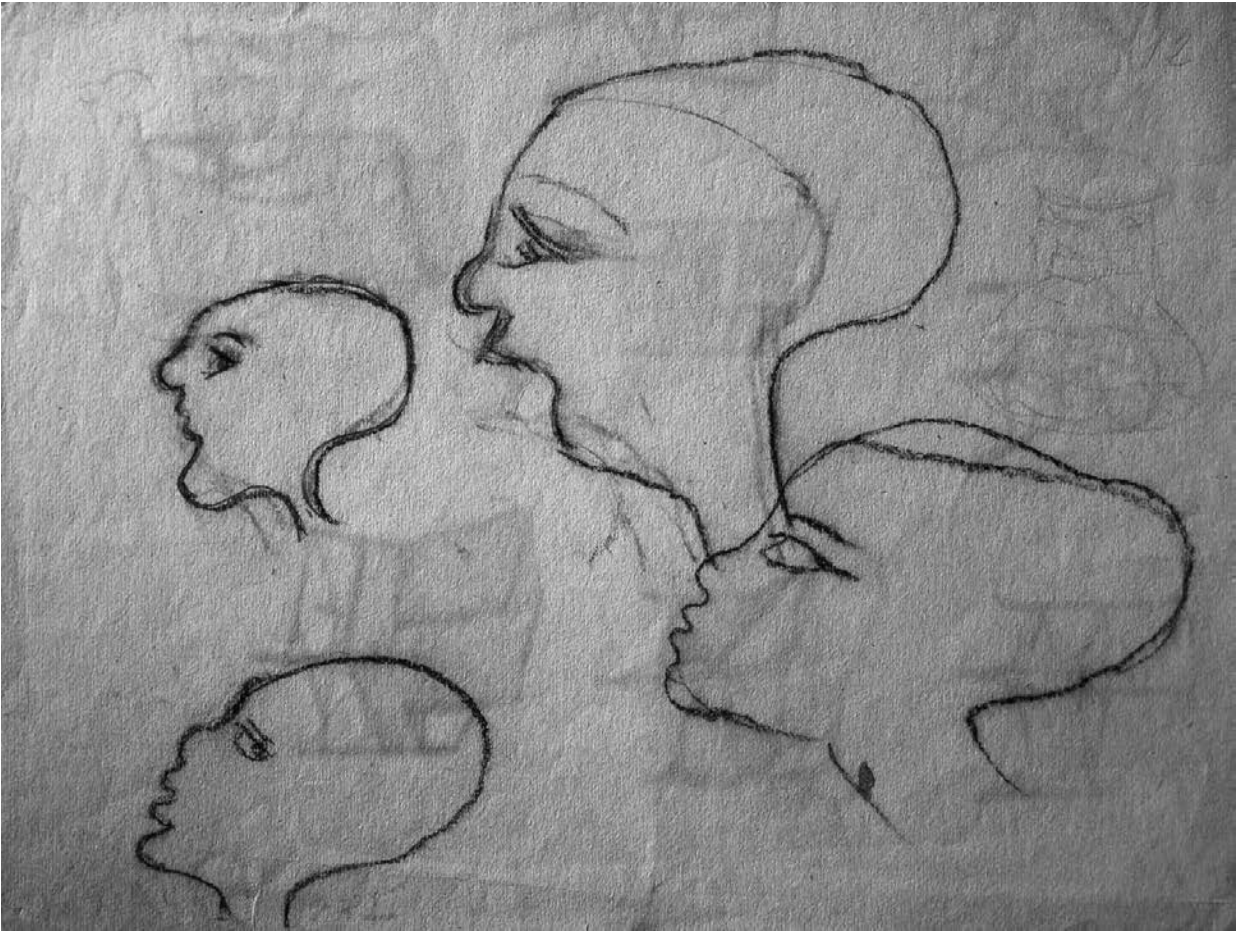
In 1941, Nazi chief Reinhard Heydrich became Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia. Later, he was also the architect of the "Final Solution of the Jewish question."



Jewish transport on its way from Bohušovice to Terezín. Photograph taken secretly by a resident of the city.



Jews arriving at the Hamburg barracks in Terezín. Later, trains were also sent off from there to Auschwitz-Birkenau.



One of many children's drawings from Terezín.



Arnošt Reiser's brother Jan Reiser at the time when all was still fine.



Photograph of Ruth Freund in Prague in 1942 with a yellow star of David on her breast.



Little Eva in the arms of her mother and father, Anna and Viktor Porges.



Eva Porges, Jan's great love.



Arrival of Hungarian Jews at Auschwitz-Birkenau in the summer of 1944. No photographs probably exist of the arrival of Czechoslovak Jews in 1944, but they would look similar: arrival at the so-called ramp and subsequently the first selection of prisoners.



With the approaching allied units, thousands of prisoners from concentration camps were forced to embark on so-called death marches. In the photograph are liberated prisoners who had been chased out on a death march from the concentration camp Neuegamme



Russian Marshal Konev was celebrated in Prague as a liberator.

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"The defector was never a member of the Communist Party in his homeland. Before the actual Communist takeover in 1948, he'd sent an application to join the Social Democratic party, but due to certain circumstances, his application was lost, and as all parties became either banned or swallowed up by the Communists, he was glad nothing came of his application."



["People's Militia" marching on Charles Bridge.]

Part 2: 1945-1960



[Detail from previous photograph.]



Jan and Eva in an image from their honeymoon trip to Tito's Yugoslavia in 1947.



Ruth and Arnošt got married the same year [1947] in Prague.



Communitss demonstrating in Old Town Square in the center of Prague, claiming to have seized power over Czechoslovakia. The closest thing to real democracy in the Soviet sphere of influence had collapsed.



Czechoslovak president Klement Gottwald (portrait on the left) is celebrated at a revolutionary trade union meeting in 1949. His leader and role model, Joseph Stalin, holds the place of honor in the middle.



1948. American soldier and West German border guards check two escapees from Czechoslovakia. At that time, the physical iron curtain between East and West Germany had not yet been built.



In 1950, Jan and Eva bought themselves a motorcycle. Freedom of movement, however, was limited by the borders of the republic.



The Czechoslovak part of the iron curtain was strictly guarded. Almost 300 refugees were killed in attempts to cross the border to Austria or West Germany. Photograph of a Czechoslovak escapee killed on the border is from 1953. In the summer of that year alone, five refugees died after running into barbed wire charged with many thousands of volts.



American soldiers in Wildenau guard the hijacked Czechoslovak train, made famous as the "Freedom Train."



Rudolf Slánský, formerly the nearly all-powerful General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, became a victim of the paranoia of his own comrades. Photograph from the staged trial, November 1952.



The gigantic Stalin monument towering over Prague was unveiled in 1955, but was already blown up in 1962 since Stalin's cult of personality was revised.



Polish demonstrators clash with the army during the Poznan uprising in 1956. At least 57 people were killed, the youngest of whom was a 13 year-old boy. Over 600 people were injured.



After the bloody suppression of the Hungarian uprising, dead bodies lay in the streets of Budapest. Almost 3,000 insurgents lost their lives, while on the Soviet side there are reports of about 700 dead. Subsequently, 35,000 Hungarians were put on trial and 350 of them received the death penalty. About 200,000 people fled the country, mostly across the border with Austria. Imre Nagy was convicted of high treason and hanged.



In 1959 Jan and Eva started to think about how they, as well as Thomas and Martin, could escape from Czechoslovakia.



Ruth and Arnošt came to the same conclusion as Eva and Jan: they must leave Czechoslovakia. If not for themselves, then for the children.

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[“In the spring of 1960, the interrogated received permission to purchase an automobile, and then joined an organization for cooperation among the Eastern Bloc militaries, almost like joining a sports organization. Members of this organization could sign up for tourist trips, via car, in the other East-Bloc countries. Because tourist trips can normally only occur in collective forms and under the leadership of a state-recognized organization, the interviewee discovered that there might be possibilities herein.

From a colleague, a female lab technician, he’d heard that, in East Germany, people could take a trip by ferry to Trelleborg in Sweden, where they could go ashore. After discussing these subjects with his family and the aforementioned Professor Reiser, they agreed that this might offer an opportunity to escape.

Through the official Czechoslovakian organization for tourism, they signed up for such a road trip to East Germany, and the interrogated obtained permission for himself and his family, including his mother-in-law, to make this journey. Recommendations from employers and trade unions—and in the mother-in-law’s case since she was retired, a recommendation from the Street Council—had to come first, after which the police issued permission for the trip.

The interrogated then paid about 10,000 Czech crowns for the entire family, for which they received food, lodging, and pocket money, along with petrol for the whole trip, which was supposed to last 15 days.”]

Part 3. (1960-2019)



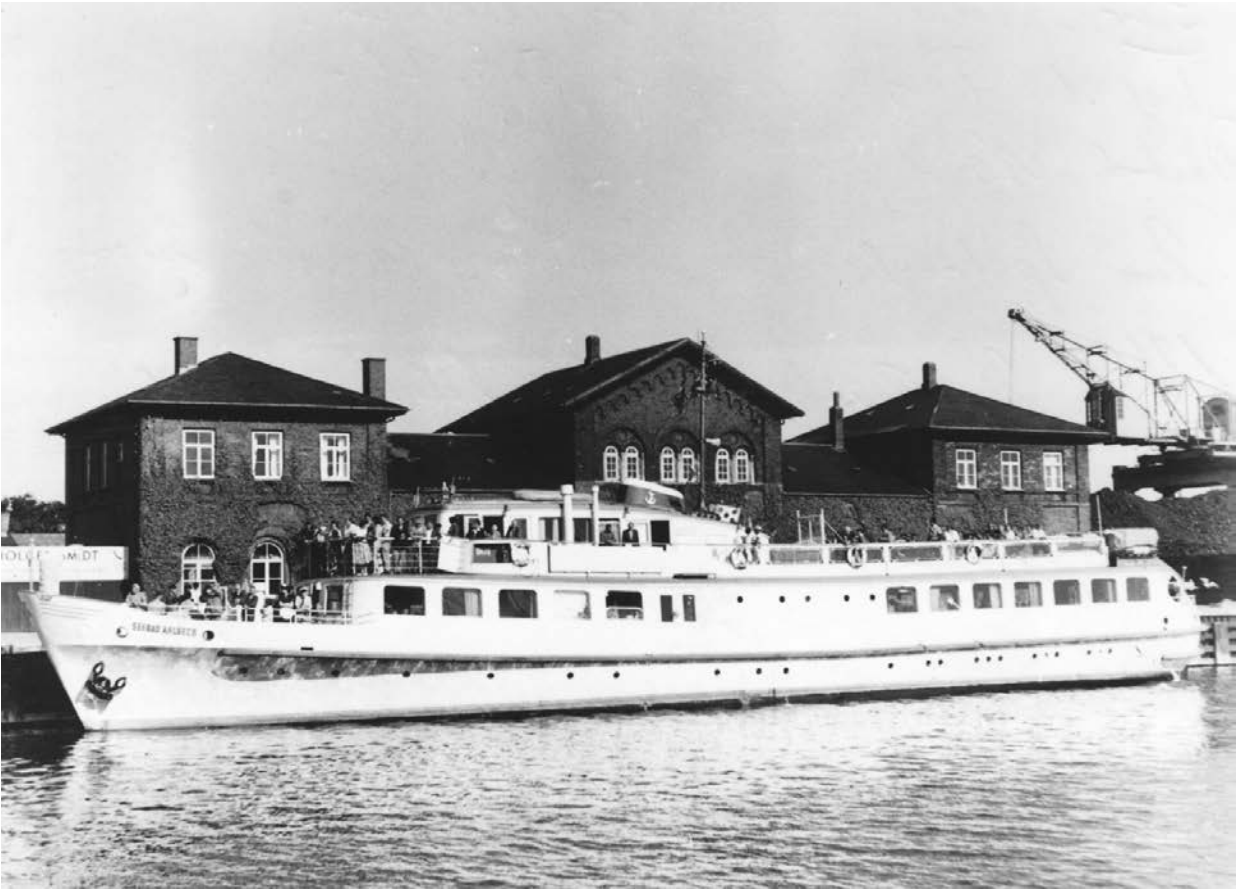
[East German passenger ship Seebad Ahlbeck.]



The ferry "Sassnitz" in the eponymous harbor. The connection to Trelleborg was one of the few links transporting passengers across the iron curtain where it ran through the Baltic Sea.



Heringsorf on the holiday island of Usedom was one of the stops of the automobile trip around [East] Germany. And one of the possibilities for escape.



The Seebad Ahlbeck in the Danish harbor of Gedser. East German passengers were not allowed to disembark. Their West German relatives, who brought them gifts, money, and greetings, stood on the shore.

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AUSFLUGSFAHRKARTE
UDFLUGTSBILLET

Kind — Barn

Warnemünde — GEDSER

und zurück — og tilbage

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24. Juli 1960

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den Tag der Hinfahrt mitgerechnet
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One of the Rocek boys' tickets for the outing on the Seebad Ahlbeck.



The West family in 1960. From the left: Jens, Emmy, Helle, Lissi, and Hans Jørn in the baby carriage.

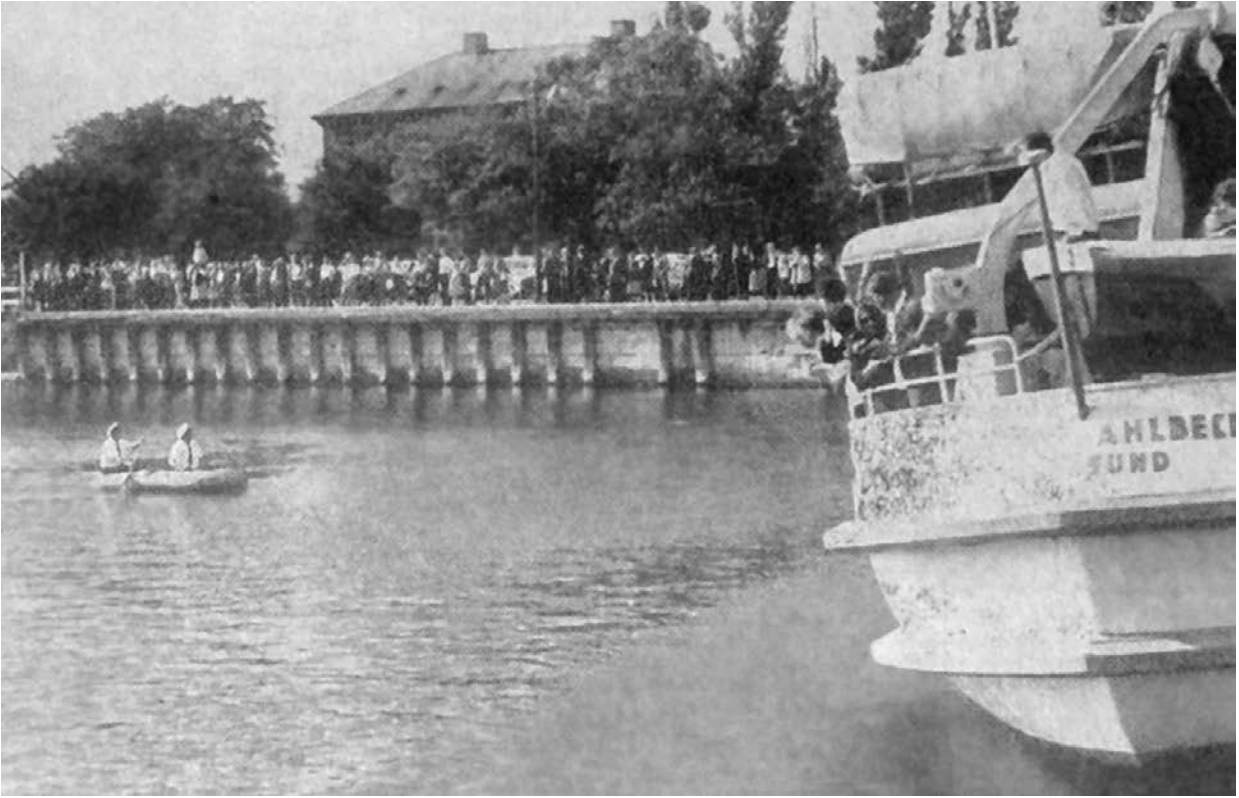


[see caption on next page]



The Reisers' jump from the deck of the "Seebad Ahlbeck" is one of only two escapes via Gedser during the Cold War that are documented photographically. The pictures were taken directly from the cruise ship by the mother of Mrs. Hana Váchalová of Prague, another Czechoslovak tourist.

After the ship arrived back in the GDR, she and her family were subjected to a long police interrogation. The photos were discovered by chance in 2019 – almost sixty years after this drama.



The media reported widely about both escapes through Gedser. The daily *Lolland-Falsters Folketidende* published the scene of the inflatable boat with two East Germans who tried to catch up with Jan and Thomas Rocek.

[The view shows the stern of the Seebad Ahlbeck with a group of passengers looking over the railing from which the Roceks had jumped a few minutes earlier. The ship is moored to a dock just off the photo on the right. With the help of Jens West, Jan and Thomas got out of the water onto a pier just past the left edge of this photo. Anna and Eva with Martin were helped out of the water onto the dock just off the right side of the photograph – that is, onto the dock to which Seebad Ahlbeck is moored. A crowd of observers stands on the shore in the background.]



Photographer Aage Sørensen of the daily *Berlingske Tidende* waited in the right place when the Reisers arrived at the police station in Copenhagen the day after the Roceks.



Captain Hermansen can be seen in the cabin of the boat into which he pulled Anna Trojanová.



The Roceks and Reisers in the Pension Fabianhus in Esrum. A Danish boy slipped into the picture towards the bottom left of the photograph.



The Danish people knew František Oswald Stein, under the name Frank Oswald, as a reporter for Danish radio and television commenting on conditions in the eastern block. This 1977 photograph shows him after he was expelled from Belgrade for participating in a demonstration.



After arrival in New York, this photograph was taken of the Roceks, Anna, a representative of the International Rescue Committee, and one of Eva's relatives [along with his wife].



This photograph of the Reisers was taken in London in 1961.



Eva in front of the house on Garfield Street in Cambridge [Massachusetts], where the Roceks occupied a large apartment on the first and second floors.



The Seebad Ahlbeck was replaced in 1961 by the Seebad Warnemünde. Many East Germans tried to jump from her in the Gedser harbor as well, either into the sea or onto shore. In September of 1961 the East German authorities ended operation of the line.

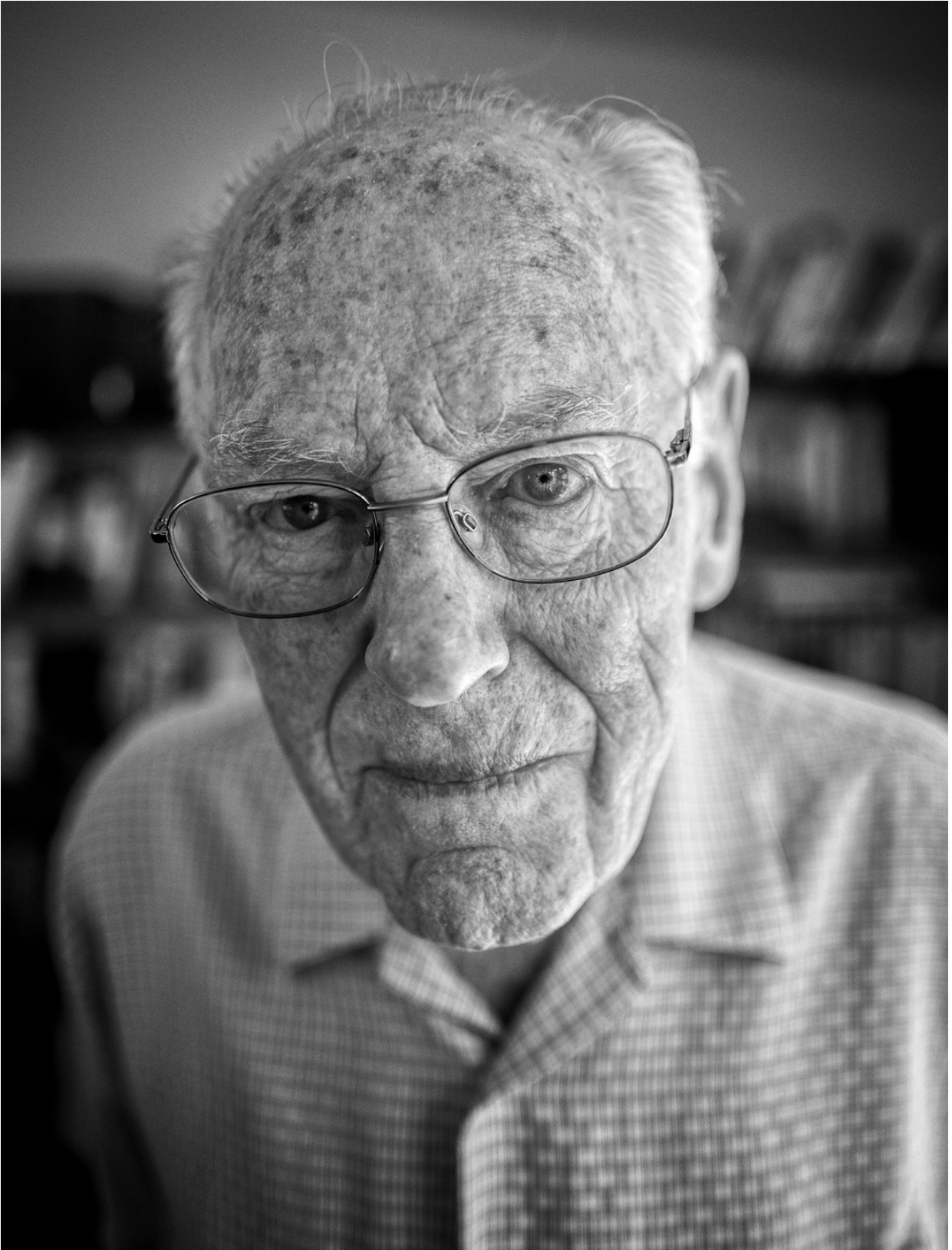


With construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, the last big opening to the West was plugged.

Epilogue



[Laying of the Stolpersteine for Jan's father, mother, and sister, September 6, 2019. Placed around the newly laid stones are photographs of Hugo Robitschek, Frieda {in Czech, "Bedřiška"} Robitscheková {born Löblová}, and Helga Robitscheková with arm around her brother, Jan]



Jan Rocek at home in the state of Delaware in May of 2019.



Arnošt and Ruth Reiser in Brooklyn in 2015. This is the last photograph of them together.



Jan Rocek with Helle West and her two children, Mette Skjold and Jeppe Skjold in the U.S. in October 2019.