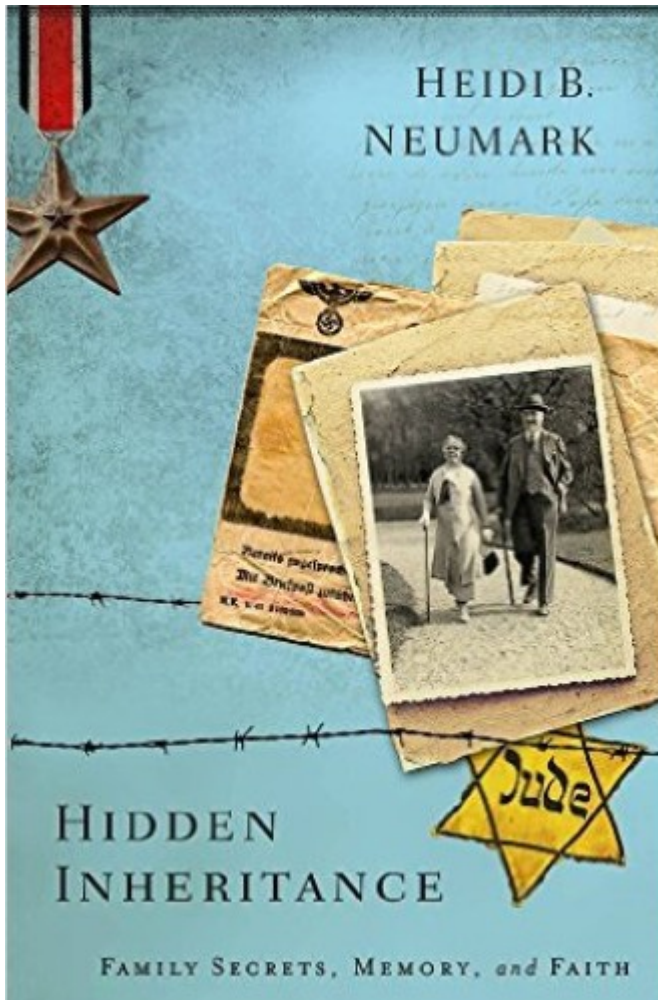


Unexpected ancestors

by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Hidden Inheritance

By Heidi B. Neumark
Abingdon

Few secrets are as devastating as those that make us rethink our entire identity. Lutheran pastor and author Heidi Neumark learned that her family harbored such a secret when her 22-year-old daughter Googled the name “Neumark” one evening

and discovered a great-grandfather very different from the one she had been told about, and a family history of which her mother knew nothing.

Neumark knew only that her father had immigrated to the United States in 1938, when he was 35 years old; that he was a devout Lutheran who kept his framed confirmation certificate (in German) on his bedroom wall; and that he came from a prosperous family in Lübeck, Germany. As a child she frequently visited her grandmother, who lived in Switzerland, and she knew her father's sisters. The aunt who lived near them was also Lutheran.

Her father was proud of his German heritage, and the family cooked German food and celebrated Christmas the way her father had celebrated it as a child in Germany. Nothing prepared her for the discovery that her father was Jewish and that her grandfather, Moritz Neumark, had died at Theresienstadt (Terezín), a concentration camp in what is now the Czech Republic.

Why had her father, who died when Neumark was 26, kept these things a secret? Why had he apparently not told even his wife? Why had neither Neumark's grandmother nor her aunts ever mentioned the family's heritage? Neumark could only speculate about the reasons. But she could try to reclaim the heritage her father denied. She set out to reconstruct the history of her paternal family.

The quest takes her on several journeys to Germany and involves online efforts to locate and communicate with scattered family members as far away as Australia and Brazil. It ends with the joyful sharing of a Passover seder with newly discovered distant cousins in California.

As Neumark traces her family's steps, she also retraces the history of the persecution of European Jews, especially in the Shoah. (Neumark prefers to use the word *Shoah*, which means "the catastrophe" in Hebrew, rather than the word *Holocaust*, which means "burnt offering" in Greek.) Though readers may know that history well, following the story of a particular family makes it vivid and immediate.

Neumark's odyssey begins in Wittmund, a village in north Germany where the first Neumarks settled during the 17th century. The last of the town's Jewish population disappeared during the Shoah. In Wittmund, Neumark finds Edzard Eichenbaum, a non-Jewish German who has devoted his later years to tracing the history of the town's Jews and has done a remarkably thorough job.

She is fascinated by the discovery that many of her Wittmund forebears were rabbis, scholars of the Talmud, and pillars of the Jewish community. She sees in them a link to her own vocation. She had long wished that she could find other Lutheran pastors in her genealogy, and now in this unexpected place she finds family continuity with religious leaders.

From Wittmund, Neumark travels to Lübeck, where her well-educated grandfather and his family settled when he was a young man and where he became a wealthy and powerful member of the city's elite—the founder and director of a large steelworks and a member of the town senate and the Reich Association of German Industry. Though her grandfather lost all of these positions in 1933 when he was 66 and Hitler became chancellor of Germany, he remained a wealthy man.

That wealth enabled him to send his children to safety as the persecution of Jews worsened and World War II became inevitable. His son, Hans, emigrated to the United States, and his younger daughter, Lore, went to England. The older daughter, Susy, remained in Germany, her future ensured by a bogus marriage to an Englishman, which gave her English citizenship. Despite the progressively worsening humiliation and persecution of Jews, Moritz Neumark and his wife continued to live in upper-class areas of Lübeck and Berlin until 1943, when they were taken to Theresienstadt.

Neumark clearly loves the elements of her religion. Baptism and communion are vital to her. But her discovery of her father's Jewish heritage introduces ambivalence into her conception of both sacraments. The account of her time in Wittmund ends with her reflections on the increasing assimilation of German Jews during the 19th century. Her great-grandparents began to give their children German names. Though her grandfather was officially named Moses Lazarus, his parents stipulated that he was to be called Moritz. Her grandparents chose to become Lutheran, and they baptized their three children and brought them up as Lutherans.

Her father was not told about his Jewish background until he was a young man, when it became necessary to tell him to make sure he didn't become a Nazi. He chose to be confirmed in the church, and when he settled in America, where Jewish identity would likely have made him face some discrimination but where his life and livelihood were not in danger, he continued to identify himself as an American of German Lutheran background. He did so all through World War II, when being German was not always seen as a good thing in the United States.

Her father's baptism is a stumbling block for Neumark. She notes that Jewish baptisms were increasingly common in Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and she attributes them to anti-Semitism, "a force so powerful and twisted that it could lead people raised as Jews, from generations of Jews, to bathe their children in waters stained with the blood of Jews." She can no longer see baptism as an unalloyed good. "My father's baptism was a moment of alienation and unrecorded dismemberment. And my father's baptism was an act of saving grace. The font was a place of death and a place of salvation," she writes.

She also struggles with communion. When she administers the sacrament, she cannot forget that in some times and places Jews were tortured and murdered on charges of desecrating the host. This persecution, she writes, "is the worst desecration of holy communion imaginable." And she mourns that Martin Luther, whose eucharistic theology she admires, wrote diatribes against the Jews that belie that theology.

Surely Neumark often wishes that she could talk about her discoveries with her parents, ask them questions, and hear her father's story from his point of view. But she has only her own point of view, and she can only speculate about her father's motives and feelings. She thinks that she saw great sorrow in her father's eyes, and that feeling unable to tell his story and claim his Jewish heritage caused him to suffer as a survivor who could not bear witness to his own truth. To her, his true face was his Jewish face, the face he kept hidden. She comforts herself by clinging to the belief that something of her father's depth calls out to her and enables her to tell his story.

But the details she presents of her father's life contradict her image of him as a man who was robbed of his true self, whose identity was imposed on him, who was denied his true religion. He seems to have chosen who he wanted to be and, at least outwardly, to have lived comfortably with that choice.

Many American immigrants choose a new identity. Former secretary of state Madeleine Albright's parents did so, as did my family. We suffered as displaced persons in Germany during the last year of World War II. My brother and I barely survived the pneumonia we developed in refugee camps, where we lived on a diet of a few pieces of cabbage floating in watery soup. Few of the ethnic Germans who remained in Yugoslavia, where our family had lived for 200 years, survived after the occupying German army retreated and Serbs took their revenge on people of

German ethnicity. We were glad to become Americans and forget the past. Perhaps Neumark doesn't give enough weight to people's own agency in creating their identities.

A pastor who has spent much of her ministry caring for people on the margins of society, and those who have been discriminated against, Neumark welcomes a heritage that places her among those who have suffered unjustly. This probably colors some of her reactions.

I was puzzled by her horror at seeing the name "ThyssenKrupp" on elevators and escalators. Gustav Krupp was an avid Nazi who indeed deserves to be regarded with anger and contempt. But Fritz Thyssen, who supported Hitler during the early days when he promised to bring Germany back to prosperity, "repudiated the violence of *Kristallnacht* and resigned his Nazi Party membership," as Neumark tells us. Thyssen was sent to Dachau as a traitor, while Krupp prospered. Why, then, does Thyssen's name disturb her as much as Krupp's does? Both men are long dead. One hopes the companies they founded are something different from and better than what they were 70 years ago.

Neumark writes that before she knew about her Jewish heritage, she sometimes wondered what her grandparents had done during the Hitler years. "Were my grandparents Nazi collaborators? Were they good people who did nothing? Neither alternative was pleasant to dwell on." The truth seems to be that her grandparents behaved typically. Like most Germans, her grandfather took care of his own and did the best he could to survive a horrible war.

Immediately after the war, when food was scarce in Berlin, Neumark's cousin Klaus managed to get a job at a club where U.S. military personnel ate, and he brought home food the soldiers gave him. His mother, Neumark's Aunt Susy, cooked whatever he brought and fed everyone who came. "I think about the fact that Susy, who never denied her Jewish roots and had close Jewish friends, was very likely feeding the enemy, providing essential nourishment to people who [might] gladly have turned her over to the Nazis," Neumark writes. But many Germans did not gladly turn their neighbors over to the Nazis, and many did not hate Jews.

Near the beginning of the book Neumark says, "As a child of a first-generation German immigrant, I learned early on that in some eyes, to have German genes was to be tainted with a lingering evil." Her discovery of her Jewish heritage doubtlessly

lifted that sense of evil from her. But her passionate claim of Jewish identity clouds her interpretation of her ancestors' religious and cultural reality. Certainly forced conversions and baptisms were a great evil. But for Neumark to see her father's baptism, which happened long before Hitler was heard of, as a "moment of alienation and unrecorded dismemberment" seems extreme.

One of Neumark's largest challenges is weaving together her two religious identities without distorting either. In this she only partially succeeds. As the fair-minded person she is, she presents her discoveries about her family as she finds them. But she interprets these discoveries on the slant. Although her remaining cousins tell her that their common grandparents gave no evidence that they practiced Judaism in any form, and although she herself concludes that they were, like many German Jews, thoroughly secularized and assimilated, she seems to regard their abandonment of Judaism as an evil forced on them against their will.

This memoir suggests that Neumark's pilgrimage of discovery is a work in progress. Clearly her discovery has deepened her sense of calling and has given her a personal sense of identity with the disenfranchised people she serves. Writing this book may be just the first step in a process of resolving the conflicts raised by the surprising discovery of her family's past.