Island of lost memories

On the small, remote German isle of Heligoland, the real story lies under the surface

Yuval Ben-Ami

One winter night during the Middle Ages, a cyclone struck Friesland, a territory that is today in northern Holland. The natural disaster, which took tens of thousands of lives, was dubbed "St. Marcellus' Flood." One-hundred-and-forty-three years later, a similar storm lashed Friesland, before pushing farther east, as far as the coasts of present-day Germany and Denmark. The peak of the storm came on exactly the same date as the first one, January 16, the feast day of St. Marcellus.

According to estimates, the second storm, in 1362, took fewer lives than the first, but left an imprint on both the history and geography of Europe. Some 250,000 acres of fields and woodlands were immersed by the huge tides. An important port, Rungholt, was totally lost; opinion is divided to this day about its exact location. On the morning after the storm, many of the survivors discovered that they were cut off from the mainland. About 40 new islands were torn from the European continent and embraced by the North Sea.

For hundreds of years, the communities that were destined to island-hood suffered from their isolation, but in the 19th century, prosperity arrived. Rail lines and steamships made possible the development of seashore tourism in the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark. For the first time, the bourgeoisie had easy access to white sands, grassy dunes and fresh-fish restaurants. Each island offered a different attraction. The ones adjacent to the coast could even be reached by horse and carriage during low tide. The more distant islands offered a maritime adventure.

Drawn by the possibility of a good story, this contemporary traveler is slightly anxious as his voyage begins. My first German island, Rügen, in the Baltic Sea, welcomed me over two decades ago with a huge monument to a sad past. I was a young hitchhiker at the time, and slept on a beach. Beyond the beach was a half-built structure almost a kilometer in length. The next day I learned that it had been part of the Prora project, a vast holiday resort for workers initiated by the Third Reich. I'd come to Rügen to see its famous white chalk cliffs and to look for remnants of its past as part of East Germany. Instead of traces of communism, I found a Nazi past.

Rügen is not the only island where bitter memories are buried beneath the sands. St. Marcellus' flood tore the island of Bant into three parts. One of them is Borkum, today the furthest west of the German islands. Borkum is blessed with a lovely town, and a sweet yellow liqueur is produced from thorns that grow in its dunes. There seems to be no sweeter place – but in fact, its shores are haunted by a ghost.

I discovered that apparition while surfing the internet on the eve of my recent visit there. The lyrics of the "Borkum Lied" (Borkum Song), a local anthem performed by the island's beach orchestra every evening in season, were first published in 1897. One verse points out that there are no undesirable guests admitted to the island: "On Borkum only Germanness rules / German is the only banner. / We keep pure the honor banner / Of Germania forever. /But he who comes to you flat-footed, / With hooked nose and curly hair, / He's got no place on your beaches / He must get out! He must get out! Get out!"

Borkum was a pioneer of a trend now known as "Bäder Antisemitismus" (spa anti-Semitism). In 1900, the island was one of 30 German holiday resorts that prohibited the presence of Jews. By the latter years of the Weimar Republic, the phenomenon extended to almost every resort in the country. Undeterred, I sailed there, tasted the liqueur and was impressed by the town's architecture and by the lighthouse. Throughout the visit, I made a point of asking local people about the song. No one admitted to having heard of it.

On my one night in Borkum, I twisted and turned in bed. True, I was no longer undesirable, but I was still sensitive to the toxicity of history. At sunrise I gave in and went for a walk in the dunes. I discovered that the disconnect from the Continent and its predators had spawned a population explosion of rabbits. Hundreds of thousands of them leaped around me under the bluing skies, too many to be cute.

A week later, I visited one of the neighboring islands to the west, which belongs to Holland and bears the challenging name of Schiermonnikoog. Geographically, Schiermonnikoog is a precise twin of Borkum; the winds and sea currents have created an identical pattern of sands, dunes and marches on both. But the twins were separated at birth. The structure and location of the settlement on the Dutch island are completely different from the village on Borkum; its houses are far smaller, its trails more cultivated. In Holland it's somehow easier for me to leave history aside, lick ice cream and enjoy a sensible number of rabbits.

Only a later check uncovered the story of Schiermonnikoog. At the end of World War II, some 600 S.S. personnel fled to the island and entrenched themselves. They remained there after the fall of Berlin, an isolated bastion somewhat like Masada, until they surrendered to the Allies on June 11, 1945.

But the island on which the war's scars are most blatant is Heligoland, the smallest of all of Germany's settled islands and the farthest from the mainland, some 45 kilometers (28 miles) north of the coast. I was fortunate to arrive in the port city of Cuxhaven, at the mouth of the River Elbe on the North Sea coast, on a day of moderate winds. Two days earlier, winds of 65 kilometers an hour (40 miles per hour) had forced a cancellation of ferry service to Heligoland. But today we were able to sail. There's no deck for cars on the ferry, because there are no cars on the island, other than electric service vehicles. Not even bicycles may be brought in, so as not to crowd the trails. The island is only one square kilometer in size (0.39 square miles) and it has a population of about 1,400. The seal population, which comes ashore at the height of the season, is a similar number.

Heligoland is a 60-meter-high plateau; next to it lies its little brother, Düne, which is flat and sandy and not permanently inhabited. Tremendous breakwaters come into view as the ferry approaches Heligoland. They were built by order of German Emperor Wilhelm II as part of island's conversion into a naval harbor. Cannons scattered around the island were used by Germany in World War I. After the war, they were covered with earth but not destroyed – a clandestine violation of the Versailles Treaty and an ominous portent for the future.

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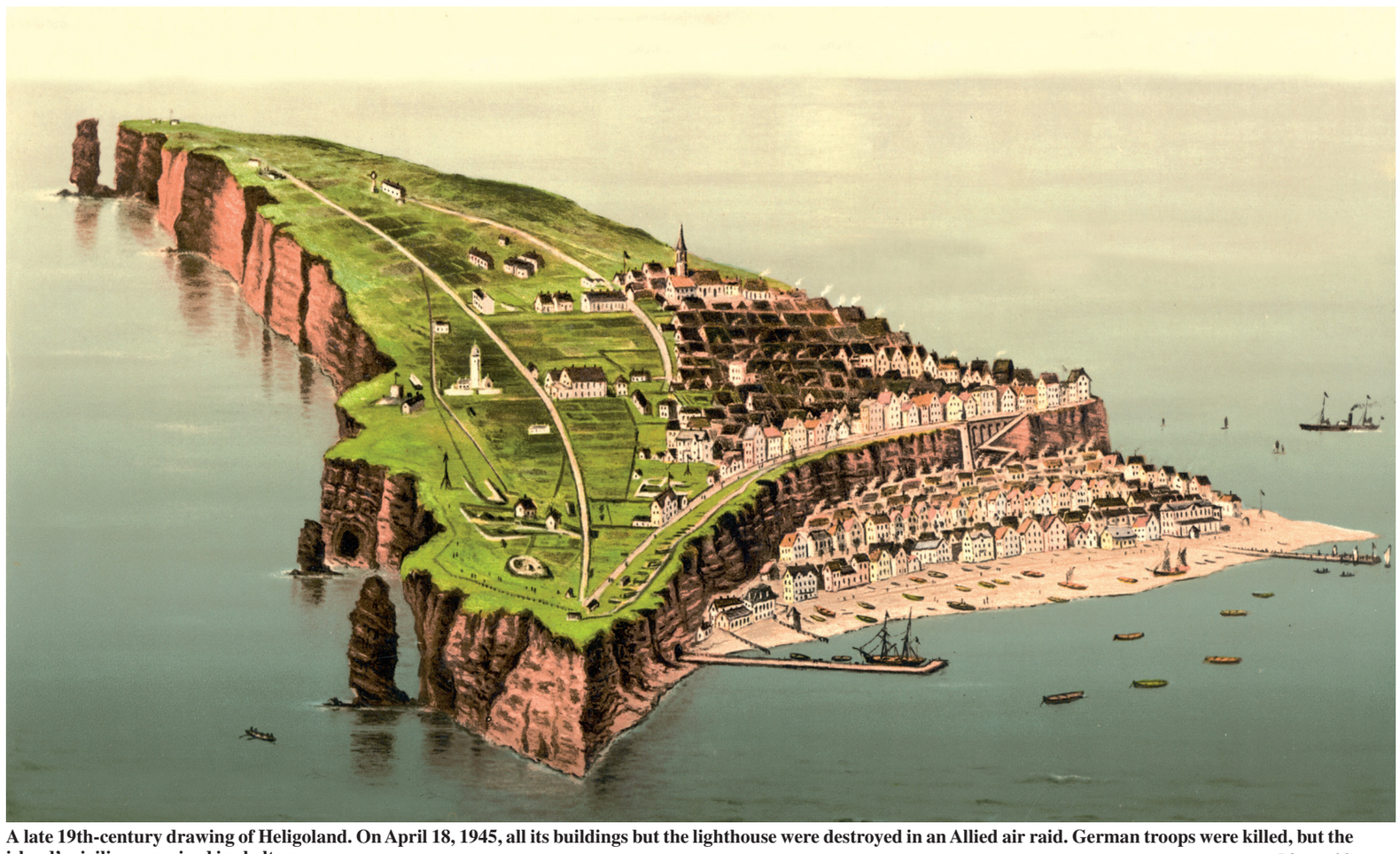
During World War I, the civilian residents of Heligoland were removed to Hamburg. After two years of exile, they returned to a life of fishing, lobster trapping, and hotel and restaurant proprietorship. But the period of peace was short. Not long after the Nazis' rise to power, Reich Admiral Erich Raeder conceived "Project Lobster Claw." The idea was to build a vast, claw-shaped naval harbor by creating a landfill around Heligoland and Düne. The entire shorelines of the two islands were to be erased, to be replaced by an airfield designated for warplanes, anchorages for battleships and submarine pens.

Work on Project Lobster Claw commenced in 1937. Tiny Düne doubled its size, and a rectangular plain was added to Heligoland. However, the project was abandoned the following year due to budgetary constraints. Instead, the Nazis built an immense subterranean fortress. It's hard to believe, but there are 10 kilometers of tunnels on the minuscule island, dug parallel and above each other, to a depth of five stories.

The island was bombed occasionally by the Allies, and on April 18, 1945, all the buildings except the lighthouse were destroyed in an air raid. German troops were killed, but the island's civilians survived in shelters, before being taken to the mainland the next day. After the war, the deserted island was occupied by the British, who used it for military experiments. On one occasion it was the site of one of the most powerful non-nuclear detonations in history, dubbed the "Big Bang." In 1952, two students and a professor from Heidelberg who had never visited the island, sailed there to demand its return to Germany and its resettlement. James Krüss, a popular author of children's books who was born on the island, sent an impassioned plea to the pope on the subject. The campaign was successful, and the island was soon restored to life – and German sovereignty.



A late 19th-century drawing of Heligoland. On April 18, 1945, all its buildings but the lighthouse were destroyed in an Allied air raid. German troops were killed, but the island's civilians survived in shelters. *Library of Congress*

Skirts and seas

I stayed at the Rungholt Hotel on the island, whose name evokes the "Atlantis of the North Sea," the port city that was lost in St. Marcellus' flood of 1362. Behind it is the lower part of the village, and above it, on a cliff, the upper section. The pre-1945 architecture has been lost, but what was built in its stead isn't bad at all. The buildings are painted in bright colors and respect the island's dimensions. It's pleasant to walk around here even in the winter, to peek into the stores and to sip on a Jever beer in a delightful pub, decorated with divers' helmets. An elevator that connects the two levels of the island makes Heligoland a convenient holiday destination even for those who need a wheelchair to get around. The island's library has a small exhibition of traditional clothing. A beautiful, simple red skirt with a yellow stripe at its base caught my eye. In the past, and today during certain festivals, the island's girls wore a skirt like this, with seven pleats sewn into it – one each for the world's seven seas.

The librarian, Ruth Köhn shows me dozens of volumes about life in the small archipelago. Another table is piled high with books and recordings dealing with the singular, North Frisian language spoken here, Halunder. In one of them I found a historical photograph of the island's quay, with a poster above it: "Jews go home."

According to Köhn, the sign was put up in 1935, when German law obligated it. Until then, she told me, Heligoland was one of the few vacation sites in Germany that welcomed Jews. I make myself a note to clarify the matter. From a distance of many years, it's easy to portray things as having been more positively than they really were.

Köhn volunteers to show me around the island. The April 1945 bombings destroyed everything above ground, apart from one tree and one building. The building is, as noted, the lighthouse, which served the Allies as a reference point. The berry tree that survived is in the upper village. A few steps from it, she opens a door that leads to steps descending deep into the earth. I assume we're heading for the bunkers, but Köhn explains that the military installation was completely demolished, and that the door leads to the civilian shelter also dating back to World War II.

There are old phones in the shelter installed during the 1960s, for emergencies. "Hundreds of tourists come here every day in the summer. Sometimes elderly people visit who were in places like this in their childhood. They don't remember it in their everyday lives, but as soon as they enter here it comes back to them and they get stressed." Small wooden toilets in one of the nooks and crannies also date from the 1960s, from the time of the Cuban missile crisis.

During World War II, the island's population swelled fivefold and more. The original 2,000 residents were augmented by 2,000 soldiers and 7,000 forced laborers who were set to work building the fortifications. Most of them, I read, were Soviet POWs, but once more a doubt arose. I ask Köhn whether other "undesirables" – Jews, for example – were also sent to the labor camp. She replies that very little documentation exists on this subject. Knowing the German obsession for documenting everything, I voice my skepticism and tell her that I will check in the archive of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem.

The exhibit in the next small room in the shelter rattled me badly. Perched on a shelf were three smooth, hard Wehrmacht helmets, one bearing a swastika. The trip to Heligoland was becoming increasingly challenging. I was in a place that called for me to identify with German pain. Seemingly it was the pain of an innocent community, whose world was destroyed. I love Germany and its people, but a reading of history has cautioned me again and again against speaking of German innocence.

Amazing self-anesthesia

One of the masterpieces of German Romanticism is Caspar David Friedrich's painting "Chalk Cliffs on Rügen." Three figures are seen against the backdrop of the white cliffs. One of them, a young man, is looking at boats fading into the distance on the sea. An older man is on his knees: He appears to have lost something near the edge of the cliff and is looking for it in the grass. A woman in a red dress is pointing downward into the abyss, directing the man's gaze perhaps toward the object he's lost, which fell some distance away.

Germany sustained a memory loss following World War II. More than 130 of its cities and towns were bombed during the conflict, some of them to the point where almost all of their physical structures were destroyed. About 600,000 civilians were killed in bombing raids, and seven million were made homeless. The Germans preferred to treat their disaster like the man in the painting, gazing far into the distance: to focus on rebuilding and play down the memories and traumas. The writer Alfred Döblin described people walking through devastated streets in the mid-1950s "as if nothing had happened, and… the town had always looked like that."

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The role of the person searching in the grass was assumed by the German writer W.G. Sebald, a member of the generation born during the war. In his 1999 article "Air War and Literature," Sebald wrote that the catastrophe of the destruction of German cities by air raids "entered the annals of the nation… only in the form of vague generalizations. It seems to have left scarcely a trace of pain behind in the collective consciousness." Sebald, who dealt frequently with the Holocaust in his books, understood very well why his compatriots ignored their calamity, but felt that in doing so they showed intellectual cowardice. He was amazed at "the extraordinary faculty for self-anesthesia shown by a community that seemed to have emerged from a war of annihilation without any signs of psychological impairment."

The destruction is not taboo in Heligoland, and the historical discourse is confident. An unusual narrative of uprooting and return is apparent on the island, made possible, in part, by the site's historical isolation from the rest of Germany: On no fewer than four occasions in its history, Heligoland belonged to Denmark. It was under British control after the Napoleonic Wars and was not transferred to Germany until 1890, in return for trading rights in Zanzibar. It is presently part of the state of Schleswig-Holstein.

The "Big Bang" crater is close to the island's harbor. Stumps of steel beams and shards of concrete still peek out from the weeds on the slopes. It is vastly deeper than the other pits. Few people come to Heligoland to see craters. Iris Schneider, the local official in charge of promoting tourism, notes that Heligoland is classified as a tax-free zone and has acquired a reputation as an "island of parties." It's trying to fight that image and to bring in non-Germans as vacationers. I tell her about the underground tour. "The strongest moment for me in the tunnels is the corner where you can listen to the British radio broadcast of the Big Bang," she says. "That always gives me goose bumps, even now."

I'm surprised. "But the island was already empty when it happened. And no one was hurt."

"True, but many people believed that Heligoland would disappear completely. The British officers talked about that, and for the displaced, the thought that not a trace would remain was horrible."

"The displaced Heligolanders were actively involved in cultivating [a] narrative of victimhood," writes German historian Jan Rüger in his book "Heligoland: Britain, Germany, and the Struggle for the North Sea." He adds, "The islanders, they argued, were neither German nor British. They had detested the militarism of the Nazis… But when it became clear that there was a growing movement in Germany demanding the return of the island, the Heligolanders realigned their position swiftly."

According to Rüger, the Heligoland exiles "played skillfully" on the dynamic of the public discussion about them. I ask Ruth Köhn what she thinks about this choice of words; she replies that she doesn't understand the reason for Rüger's blatant cynicism. "The right to identify oneself as a victim is a basic human right," she says.

Did the island's residents gain anything from the location of the fortification? "Absolutely not," Köhn replies. "As early as when Wilhelm II was here, part of the island was declared off-limits to the inhabitants, and in the 1940s the whole southern part of the island was covered with land mines. You see how small this place is. Every slice that is lost from it creates a problem. The large structures of the base in the Nazi period were built right on our vegetable gardens. Why should anyone be happy about that?"

Köhn's observation was reinforced that very afternoon, over a herring sandwich in a friendly eatery in the lower village. Its proprietor, Raymond Davies, came to Heligoland from London in 1969, in the wake of his partner, a native of the island. He was surprised when I asked him how he had been received, in light of the damage Britain had wrought. "What are you talking about? Naturally I was received well. These people are Anglophiles! To this day, there are memorial plaques dedicated to Queen Victoria in the church. When the Nazis were here, the Heligolanders hung Union Jacks in the windows. The only reason they weren't shot was that they are Heligolanders, so they weren't taken seriously."

House warmings

Not far from the eatery, a stranger asked me whether I happen to be from Israel. Patrick, a nature reserves official, had heard about my visit. He extended an invitation that allowed me to leave the past behind and to join him the following day to count the gray seals on the shores of Düne.

The morning outing was pleasant. Patrick counted about 900 individual seals. For a moment I forget the history, but on the way back to Heligoland thoughts about the past century return. About half of the displaced persons from the island chose to resume their life there. Köhn and Schneider volunteered to arrange a meeting for me with one of them, but asked me to be patient. The elderly folk, they said, had experienced a trauma – the bombing of their island, the nights underground, the loss of their entire village, then exile and repatriation – and had to be prepped for an interview. While we were waiting, a new storm drew near. The forecast was for at least four days of extreme winds, and people in the know predicted that the ferries would stop running. I rushed to board the last ferry to leave the island.

From raucous Hamburg, the opposite of the sweet, silent island, I sent Köhn questions for the old-timers, and at the same time sent a query to Yad Vashem about the identity of those who were incarcerated in the forced-labor camp. I received a surprising reply from Jerusalem. Yad Vashem knows Heligoland first and foremost as a bastion of resistance to the anti-Semitism of the spas. Jacob Borut, a historian at the Holocaust memorial, noted that the positive attitude led many Jews to buy small vacation homes on the island.

Testimony from the island arrived the next day. Gunther Köhn, Ruth's father-in-law, was 5 when he survived the April shelling in a bomb shelter, but doesn't remember the experience. However, he notes that the inhabitants decided to return to the island even before they left. And he does have a vivid memory of the rebuilding of the homes: "We celebrated 28 housewarmings in one month. Two or three houses were completed every day, and the builders were drunk all the time. We worked on Sundays, too, and as soon as that was finished we started to work at sea and to bring in tourists."

Between leaving in 1945 and returning about seven years later, Gunther did have memories of the period of exile. Many of them had to do with animals. He remembers a speckled black hen scratching around in the yard. Fourteen chicks emerged from its eggs at about the same time. Gunther recalls being excited to see how the mother hen protected all the little ones under one wing.

London-born Raymond Davies. "These people are Anglophiles! To this day, there are memorial plaques dedicated to Queen Victoria in the church." *Yuval Ben-Ami*