

Luck story

Author finds inspiration in ancestors who survived the Holocaust

BY HOPE KATZ GIBBS

FOR AS LONG as she can remember, Georgia Hunter has been a writer. At age 4, in homage to her father Thomas Hunter's 1982 sci-fi book, *Softly Walks the Beast*, she penned her first novel, calling it *Charlie Walks the Beast*.



Georgia Hunter

ANDREA CARSON

When she was 11, she pitched an opinion piece to her hometown newspaper; since that debut in the Attleboro, Massachusetts, *Sun Chronicle*, her personal essays and photos have been featured in *The New York Times*' "Why We Travel" column, in *travel* magazine and on *Equitrekking.com*.

At 15, the seeds for her epic historical novel, *We Were the Lucky Ones*, were planted when a high school teacher assigned an I-Search project for students to explore their ancestry. Over an afternoon spent talking with her grandmother, Hunter—who was not being raised in the Jewish faith—was surprised to learn that she came from a family of Holocaust survivors.

"I had no idea that my grandfather was Polish-born, much less Jewish," shares the author, whose book was named one of the "Best Books to Read in 2017" by *Glamour* and *Harper's Bazaar*. She didn't think about the project for another six years, until she attended a family reunion, when additional stories of the war were revealed. "I knew then that I needed to investigate and write about what happened," she says.

Armed with a digital voice recorder and a Moleskine notebook, Hunter set off on a nine-year journey that took her around the globe. The

result is her acclaimed book starring her ancestors, the Kurc family.

From the first page, readers are catapulted to the spring of 1939. In the small Polish town of Radom, 62 miles from Warsaw, the close-knit clan is living under the cloud of the looming war. By the end of the 400-page novel, readers have traveled from the jazz clubs of Paris to Krakow's most brutal prison to the ports of Northern Africa and the far reaches of the Siberian gulag.

Does the Kurc family reunite, as they promise each other they will?

"Without giving away too much of the plot, I can tell you that in real life my family is somewhat of a statistical anomaly," Hunter, now 39, tells *The Connection*. "I can only imagine how hard it must have been for my relatives to keep putting one foot in front of the other, to stay one step ahead of danger and to remain hopeful that they may see each other again."

Walking in their footsteps was essential, Hunter insists, noting some of the most poignant moments of her research were the hours she spent in Radom: "I felt drawn to visit, but was scared to go. But I found a quaint town with beautiful cobblestone streets, wrought-iron lamps and red poppy flowers spilling out over balconies, and understood why my great-grandparents had chosen to raise a family there."

Hunter also visited the empty square where Radom's synagogue once stood, along with the old Jewish cemetery, which, before World War II, was populated with thousands of headstones. Only a handful exist today, as the majority were ripped up by Nazis to build an airstrip. "While Radom felt surprisingly livable, it also left me with a very haunting, chilling feeling of ghosts being all around me," Hunter acknowledges.

Hunter hopes to inspire others to go on their own I-Search expeditions. "It's incredibly rewarding to look back in time, to put your relatives on a map in a time frame, then research that era and think, what was it like to live back then? If you have the chance, ask questions of your relatives and write your findings down in a notebook or an online blog. It'll be your gift to future generations." **C**

Hope Katz Gibbs is a journalist living in northern Virginia whose ancestors hail from Kiev.



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PENNIE'S PICK

I'M ABOUT AS sentimental as they come. It's not just stories about my family that pull at me and have me tearing up faster than you can say "reunion." I'm ready to listen to or read about any family saga—fact or fiction. First-time novelist Georgia Hunter delivers just the kind of story I love in this month's book buyer's pick, *We Were the Lucky Ones*.

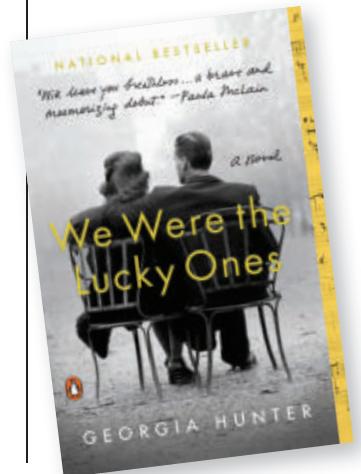
In a novel spanning many years and countries, Hunter tells the story of the Kurc family, which is split apart at the outset of World War II. The rest of the novel follows the family as they fight to reconnect.

The fact that this book is inspired by her family's story makes it all the more touching.

We Were the Lucky Ones (Item #1213108) will be available in early January in most Costco warehouses.

For more book picks, see page 107.

—Pennie Clark Iannicello,
Buyer, Books



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