

Tenacity

Stories from a Family of the Twentieth Century

Andreas Herdina

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Cover photo:

My parents with their first two children in 1957;
This picture epitomises their tenacity and confidence in building
their lives during the period of hardship after the Second World War,
quite typical of their generation

*In loving memory of my parents
Elizabeth and Kurt*

Table of Contents

<i>Prologue</i>	15
<i>Personalities in this book</i>	17
<i>The oldest generation</i>	17
<i>John and Phyllis Sellors' five daughters</i>	17
<i>The three children of Herbert and Maria</i>	18
<i>Other personalities</i>	18
<i>Chapter 1: Excursion to the origins of my ancestors and of other personalities in this book</i> 20	
<i>Roots in Bohemia</i>	20
<i>A Tyrolean peasant family</i>	20
<i>Young Maria, my great-grandmother (possibly coming of age photo, 1898)</i>	21
<i>A family finding its way to Tirol via Saxony</i>	21
<i>A family having moved from North Wales to Liverpool</i>	23
<i>A workers' family from Derbyshire</i>	25
<i>A Jewish family from Bohemia</i>	25
<i>A Ladin migrant from South to North Tirol</i>	26
<i>Chapter 2: At the dawn of the Twentieth Century</i>	27
<i>A bright young boy on his path from factory work to theology student</i>	27
<i>A Welsh shipowner's daughter</i>	28
<i>A young boy from Saxony</i>	30
<i>Young Maria</i>	30
<i>Chapter 3: The First World War</i>	32
<i>John meets Phyllis</i>	32
<i>Two young men enlist and experience battle in France</i>	33
<i>Life as an Army Chaplain, and a deepening relationship with Phyllis</i>	35
<i>Dispatched to the British Salonika Force</i>	36
<i>John proposes to marry Phyllis</i>	37
<i>The war drags on</i>	39
<i>Aviator at the frontlines</i>	40
<i>Even without enemy contact, flying was a tricky business</i>	42
<i>Two young Austrians, keen on mountaineering</i>	43

<i>Chapter 4: The not so “Roaring Twenties”</i>	46
<i>Post-war weddings</i>	46
<i>Starting life as an Anglican clergyman and parson’s wife in Cape Town</i>	47
<i>Vicarage in Yorkshire</i>	51
<i>Back to civilian life</i>	52
<i>The two mountaineers start a family, too</i>	53
<i>Lifelong employment with the “Nordkettenbahn” cable-car company</i>	58
<i>Two family members emigrate to the United States</i>	60
<i>The next generation grows up and starts school</i>	61
<i>Chapter 5: Political turmoil in the 1930s</i>	65
<i>Vicar in the parishes of Shepley and Morley</i>	65
<i>From ship’s doctor to general practitioner</i>	67
<i>Quite a character within the staff of the Nordkettenbahn cable-car company</i>	67
<i>School children in politically charged Austria</i>	69
<i>No intention of returning</i>	72
<i>Five sisters attend school</i>	73
<i>Chapter 6: The “Anschluss” of Austria to the German Reich (1938)</i>	76
<i>Flight in the last minute</i>	77
<i>The Nazi takeover of the “Nordkettenbahn” cable-car company</i>	77
<i>The “Gipfelstürmer” mountaineering club during the Nazi period</i>	81
<i>Two teenagers subjected to the totalitarian regime of Hitler’s dictatorship</i>	82
<i>The “ancestry pass” (“Ahnenpass”)</i>	84
<i>Discrimination and persecution</i>	87
<i>The fate of the Hungerburg Church under the Nazi regime</i>	88
<i>Chapter 7: The Second World War</i>	90
<i>Part I – 1939 to 1941</i>	90
<i>The rumblings of war come closer, helping refugees</i>	90
<i>War unleashed – life in Britain</i>	92
<i>War unleashed – life in Austria</i>	95
<i>First time lucky</i>	99
<i>Sharing anxiety with a Canadian cousin</i>	100
<i>Letters from America</i>	101

<i>A murderous regime</i>	103
<i>Final days in Viipuri (Vyborg)</i>	104
<i>Part II – 1942 to 1944</i>	105
<i>Training as a nursery school teacher and finding her first job</i>	105
<i>A new parish for John</i>	107
<i>Diverted to Burma</i>	107
<i>Serving as “Luftwaffe” ground crew member on the Eastern Front</i>	108
<i>Second time lucky, aircraft maintenance in Ukraine, reprisals in Moldova, first battles</i>	109
<i>A soldier in Rommel’s “Afrika Korps”</i>	114
<i>Prisoner-of-war in New York and lumberjacking in Tennessee</i>	116
<i>Conscientious objector, bomb disposer</i>	118
<i>In the meantime, back in Austria</i>	118
<i>Transfer to Normandy</i>	119
<i>Third time lucky, D-Day</i>	120
<i>Retreating out of France</i>	122
<i>Into the combat zones near the German frontier</i>	123
<i>A friendship forged in wartime</i>	124
<i>Military service for Herbert, too</i>	125
<i>Victim of Nazi persecution</i>	126
<i>A war-time encounter changes life for a young woman</i>	127
<i>Part III – 1945</i>	128
<i>Herbert builds more cable cars as a conscript into the German Army</i>	128
<i>Wounded; fourth time lucky</i>	129
<i>Fifth time lucky</i>	130
<i>Tyrolean teenagers as Hitler’s final reserve</i>	131
<i>Civilians had to go into hiding too</i>	132
<i>Legal advisor to the British forces in Belgium</i>	132
<i>Herbert’s war ends in Tirol</i>	132
<i>The end of the war in Britain</i>	134
<i>Chapter 8: Peace at last</i>	135
<i>Prisoner-of-war</i>	135
<i>Allied occupation of Tirol</i>	140

<i>Denazification</i>	141
<i>Europe in ashes, providing humanitarian aid</i>	143
<i>Finding a new life in Switzerland</i>	144
<i>A life shattered by the Nazis</i>	145
<i>A young lady finds her dream job and travels to the Continent</i>	145
<i>A student with meagre means</i>	148
<i>The first of the five daughters to marry</i>	151
<i>A mountain hike in the Ötztal Alps</i>	153
<i>Chapter 9: A new beginning in the 1950s</i>	157
<i>A new parish in Wiltshire</i>	157
<i>One sister went to South Africa</i>	157
<i>Another sister went to Malaya</i>	158
<i>A British woman and an Austrian man get engaged six years after the war</i>	161
<i>The newly-weds' life in Vienna</i>	168
<i>Sports and teaching</i>	172
<i>The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II</i>	172
<i>Keeping a family spread around, together</i>	173
<i>Building a house and starting a family in Innsbruck</i>	173
<i>The family grows</i>	179
<i>Life stabilised for other family members, too</i>	180
<i>My earliest memories</i>	183
<i>Active retirement in Sussex</i>	185
<i>Finally, a secure job to support a growing family</i>	187
<i>The last of five sisters to marry</i>	193
<i>Other families expanded, too</i>	195
<i>A Finnish summer</i>	196
<i>My memories of my great-grandmother Maria</i>	197
<i>My Austrian grandfather's early death</i>	198
<i>Chapter 10: The 1960s – a period of hard work and societal change</i>	201
<i>New tasks for Kurt</i>	201
<i>Headmistress in Kuala Lumpur</i>	203
<i>Transgenerational wartime trauma</i>	207

<i>My primary school years.....</i>	208
<i>Our home evolved, too.....</i>	213
<i>Meeting our grandparents in Genoa</i>	214
<i>Further events in Innsbruck.....</i>	216
<i>A new parish for Anna and Peter.....</i>	218
<i>Summer holidays in England.....</i>	220
<i>Back home in Innsbruck.....</i>	227
<i>Tragedies.....</i>	228
<i>Reminders of the war.....</i>	229
<i>The Olympic Winter Games 1964.....</i>	230
<i>A better life for our family members in Switzerland.....</i>	230
<i>A distant family relationship.....</i>	231
<i>A new vocation in Britain.....</i>	232
<i>A love of sports</i>	232
<i>My high school (secondary school) years.....</i>	233
<i>Television brings international politics to our household.....</i>	236
<i>Adolescence.....</i>	237
<i>A pen-pal in France</i>	238
<i>The turbulent 1968 movement - living in a period of change.....</i>	238
<i>Another transformer station project for Kurt.....</i>	243
<i>Chapter 11: Troubled times – the struggle for freedom and autonomy in South Tirol.....</i>	245
<i>Chapter 12: Growing of age in the analogue world.....</i>	253
<i>The winds of change belatedly come to Austria</i>	253
<i>Practicing my French on an Atlantic island.....</i>	254
<i>My last years at high school</i>	254
<i>The transformer station in Haiming takes shape.....</i>	258
<i>The Bexhill Hospital Car Service</i>	259
<i>Diana returns to England.....</i>	260
<i>Gwyneth moves closer to London</i>	261
<i>Peter and Anna move once again.....</i>	261
<i>John and his brother James</i>	262
<i>Adapting to life without home-bound children.....</i>	262

<i>Military service</i>	265
<i>Travelling by Interrail</i>	267
<i>Starting my law studies</i>	269
<i>A historic shift in the perception of a half-Brit</i>	270
<i>Continued links with South Africa</i>	271
<i>Sad news from England</i>	271
<i>Joining the Hungerburg voluntary fire brigade</i>	272
<i>My first travel by airplane, a tour of Israel</i>	276
<i>Catching the “sailing bug”</i>	278
<i>Tennis for Elizabeth, building for Kurt</i>	279
<i>Great travellers – either in Europe or overseas</i>	280
<i>Meanwhile in Switzerland</i>	280
<i>A man with a role in the Cold War</i>	281
<i>Completing my law studies</i>	283
<i>Chapter 13: A lawyer and diplomat</i>	287
<i>First steps as a young lawyer, court trainee</i>	287
<i>Attaining an officer’s rank in the voluntary fire brigade</i>	291
<i>More reserve duties with the Austrian Army</i>	293
<i>More sailing</i>	295
<i>Taking the Bar Exam</i>	297
<i>Travels</i>	298
<i>A lawyer in my own right, a political candidate, and a married man</i>	298
<i>Heading the Tyrolean section of the Austrian-Israeli Society</i>	302
<i>Leaving the legal profession</i>	302
<i>Trainee at the Austrian Foreign Ministry</i>	305
<i>Business and private trips to Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Israel</i>	308
<i>An active retiree</i>	311
<i>Attaché at the feet of the Karakorum</i>	313
<i>Back in Vienna, waiting for my first posting</i>	323
<i>Cherry blossoms in a booming land</i>	325
<i>Geneva, assigned to Austria’s mission to the United Nations</i>	336
<i>Sailing</i>	341

<i>The world-wide traveller.....</i>	342
<i>Widowed.....</i>	346
<i>News from other family members.....</i>	348
<i>A fascinating new job ahead.....</i>	349
<i>Chapter 14: Implementing the Dayton Peace Agreement</i>	351
<i>Starting work at the Office of the High Representative.....</i>	351
<i>The living and the dead: the scars of “ethnic cleansing”.....</i>	355
<i>Contacts with IFOR, and the delivery of my private Volvo.....</i>	361
<i>Daily life in Sarajevo.....</i>	364
<i>Return and reconstruction.....</i>	366
<i>Taking three hits</i>	371
<i>Practical steps to help overcome post-war divides.....</i>	374
<i>The Return and Reconstruction Task Force (RRTF).....</i>	376
<i>A career-move to Brussels?.....</i>	378
<i>In the “Heart of Darkness” – “Sleeping with the Enemy”</i>	379
<i>Back in Sarajevo, and preparing for a new assignment.....</i>	395
<i>Working with the military.....</i>	395
<i>Leaving Bosnia and Herzegovina after a life-changing experience.....</i>	399
<i>Chapter 15: Reuniting Europe.....</i>	402
<i>Life in the EU fast lane.....</i>	402
<i>Helping Lithuania prepare for EU accession</i>	403
<i>Private matters in and out of Brussels.....</i>	407
<i>Dealing with nuclear safety in the EU accession countries</i>	408
<i>The “Melk Process”</i>	411
<i>A trip to Mali, seeing my first Euro notes in Austria, changing to an H-boat.....</i>	415
<i>Handling the fallout from legacy decrees of the Second World War</i>	418
<i>Hiking in Mauritania and a trip to Moscow.....</i>	421
<i>The EU Accession Treaty and a last-minute minor hitch.....</i>	425
<i>Overseeing the implementation of Lithuania’s EU Accession Treaty.....</i>	426
<i>Impressions of Finland.....</i>	428
<i>Visiting my parents.....</i>	429
<i>Meanwhile in Switzerland</i>	432

<i>Forging the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)</i>	432
<i>To Mauretania, once again</i>	436
<i>Husband to a Finnish diplomat</i>	437
<i>Affected by the Asian tsunami, skiing and sailing</i>	437
<i>More work on the ENP</i>	438
<i>Leaving EU external policy with a sense of achievement</i>	440
<i>Heading North</i>	443
Chapter 16: Establishing an EU Agency in Helsinki from scratch	444
<i>New job, new home</i>	444
<i>A new sailboat for the Finnish Archipelago</i>	445
<i>Work and life in Finland</i>	447
<i>Starting a seven year long “shuttling marriage”, trips to Türkiye</i>	450
<i>Work and free time back in Finland</i>	452
<i>Elizabeth and Kurt still going strong; Diana holds court</i>	454
<i>Kurt and Elizabeth suffer a car accident</i>	456
<i>Preparing the Agency for Brexit</i>	457
<i>Harassment at the work place, a warning</i>	461
<i>India, the new destination for the “shuttling spouse”</i>	461
<i>2017 – A year of joy and sorrow</i>	463
<i>Kurt, now a widower</i>	465
<i>Looking back at a decade working at ECHA</i>	466
Chapter 17: Active retirement, a tumbling world order, visiting Austria	467
<i>“Active Senior” - Brexit</i>	467
<i>The colours and bustle of India</i>	467
<i>The generations pass the baton</i>	476
<i>House spouse, and the Covid-19 crisis</i>	479
<i>Rigged elections in Belarus</i>	480
<i>Adapting to the COVID pandemic</i>	481
<i>More sailing in Cap Verde</i>	483
<i>Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the shock of 24 February 2022</i>	484
<i>Crossing the Atlantic and sailing at the “Höga Kusten” in Sweden</i>	487
<i>The Finnish language</i>	490

<i>A “trailing spouse”, Vienna.....</i>	491
<i>The shock of 7 October 2023.....</i>	492
<i>Observing Austria from closer up.....</i>	494
<i>The burden of history.....</i>	497
<i>People and politics.....</i>	499
<i>The disruptive end of the post-war world and European order.....</i>	504
<i>Family ties and cultural highlights.....</i>	507
<i>Chapter 18: Finding our compass in a world of turmoil</i>	509
<i> The lost world order.....</i>	509
<i> A new, darker reality.....</i>	511
<i> Our European democracies under hybrid attack.....</i>	511
<i> The imperative of a strong mindset.....</i>	512
<i> A strong European Union in a new geopolitical environment.....</i>	513
<i> Realism as a starting point.....</i>	513
<i> Social cohesion in an open society.....</i>	514
<i> Gender cohesion.....</i>	515
<i> Ethics in the times of Artificial Intelligence.....</i>	516
<i> Humanism and the values enshrined in the Treaty on the European Union.....</i>	517
<i> Keeping an open mind, accepting realities.....</i>	518
<i>Epilogue.....</i>	520
<i>Sources and photo credits</i>	522
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	523

Prologue

Whenever, over the years, I told the stories of my family to friends, and even when I did so to strangers, many urged me to write them down. The narrative of this book takes you through the history of the Twentieth Century, seen through the personal experiences of members of my family. It tells their stories.

The chapters of the book reach beyond the one hundred years of the Twentieth Century. The first chapter provides a sense of family background prior to 1900. The final chapters stretch into the current century, up until 2025, when the international order of the Twentieth Century, established in the aftermath and in response to the Second World War, gave way to new, turbulent times.

My family background is Austrian, English, German, Welsh, and looking back further, also Czech. My grandparents confessed to the Anglican, Calvinist (Welsh) Congregationalist, Lutheran, and Roman-Catholic denominations of the Christian faith. Most family members lived in Britain or in the Austrian Tirol. Some spent parts of their lives in more far-flung places such as Malaysia and South Africa. They experienced events of our recent European history from different perspectives.

I tell the story only of those, whom I knew personally, not of preceding generations, and neither of those with extraordinary profiles, such as the Welsh sheep farmer in Patagonia or the Japanese foster daughter brought into the family by a lighthouse keeper in the Chinese Sea, nor of my more distant relatives in Canada. I mention persons of my own generation only incidentally to the extent that the narrative requires.

I was born in 1953, merely eight years after the Second World War ended. Then, my town of origin Innsbruck was still under Allied (French) occupation. I spent nearly five decades of my life in the Twentieth Century, witnessing key political changes between the 1960s and 1990s. During my youth, my mixed family and rather austere upbringing may have set me aside from some of my peers, but the social and political environment that I describe, was the same for us all. My profession provided me with personal insights into more recent history, from post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina to EU Enlargement and Brexit. The book's narrative evolves from stories of my ancestors to some of my own. My life story took me from Innsbruck to Vienna, Islamabad, Tokyo, Geneva, Sarajevo, Brussels and Helsinki, where I am resident since late 2008.

If you were to ask me about my own identity, then I most likely identify as European as well as a Tyrolean with strong links to Austria and Finland, and gradually lessening links to the United Kingdom.

In addition to my own family members, I mention my parents-in-law as well as my first boss from when I was a young lawyer, and a neighbour, who introduced me to sailing as a hobby.

Wherever I thought it to be appropriate for the benefit of readers, I added an explanation of the historical context, particularly regarding events in Austria. These are, of course, not the remarks of a professional historian, but summarise my own best knowledge and understanding of events, without claiming academic accuracy. Where I have erred, I stand to be corrected.

In spite of my expectations in that regard, I was still surprised by the impact of the Nazi regime from 1938 to 1945 on the lives of the Austrians mentioned in the book. Regarding my British relatives, I was similarly surprised, to what extent the British colonial lifestyle continued well into the 1960s and 1970s.

I have endeavoured to establish facts and to reflect my findings as accurately as possible. I have immensely benefited from documents, letters and photos that my parents collected and left in large numbers. Some are included as illustrations. I used *italics* to express assumptions, wherever the documentation left doubts. My description of the historic background as well as some side stories appear in *italics*, too.

With regard to geographical names, I have chosen to write “*Tirol*” instead of “*Tyrol*” to be closer to the official name of the province of my birth than to the anglicised touristic name. Yet, I use “*Tyrolean*” as an adjective. I mention place names in South Tirol in both their German and Italian versions (i.e., *Bozen / Bolzano*), as readers may only find the Italian names on a map, and as both languages have official status in the province. Place names in Bohemia, the land of a number of ancestors mentioned in this book, appear in German, as used in their lifetime, with the Czech names added in brackets.

I entitled this book “*Tenacity*”, as this characteristic is a defining attribute of the generations described in this book. Those, who pulled up stumps in the Nineteenth Century to leave Wales or Bohemia to move to England or Austria proved determination in starting a new life. My grandfather and great-uncles as well as my father had to muster personal strength as soldiers during the two world wars. My grandmother Phyllis and my mother Elizabeth showed grit, when they exchanged comfort for austerity as a chaplain’s wife or to clear a forest to build a house with little means in the post-war era. Their daily lives were impacted by food rationing and mail censorship into the early 1950s. Through hard work that separated him from his family for most of his career, my father provided a foundation for my upbringing and that of my brothers. That my mother played competitive tennis until the age of 90 and my father remained remarkably active until his last day, also inspired me to choose this book’s title. Finally, as to myself, I needed to pluck up a good measure of self-discipline and determination to handle my own professional and personal challenges, most of all during my deployment to post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina only a few months after the Dayton Peace Agreement.

The last chapter and the Epilogue reflect my thoughts on current affairs, as I draw conclusions from the stories of each personality in this book. These reinforce my beliefs that I pinned to my Twitter (now X) handle in January 2021:

“Decency, truthfulness, accountability, factual discourse, respect for human dignity, rule-of-law, civilised dialogue, social cohesion, sound economic policies are essentials of our liberal democracies; a strong European Union is our home in a challenging world. For us to uphold.”

I hope that you enjoy these stories or, with regard to the more sombre accounts, gain insights into the historical circumstances, in which they occurred.

Finally, my intention in writing this book was not only to document a period, to which readers of my generation can relate. I also want to point out to younger readers that previous generations also had to face the legacies that their elders had left. They then tackled the challenges of their time.

I hope that this book will find your interest.

Helsinki, January 2026

Personalities in this book

The oldest generation

Maria Köchler née Schönfels, born 26 February 1877 in Vomp, Tirol, Austria, my great-grandmother, held various jobs (e.g., ticket controller in a cinema), died 3 June 1966.

John Sellors, born 5 October 1886 in Matlock, Derbyshire, England, my maternal grandfather, Anglican clergyman, parish priest of various parishes in England and initially in Cape Town, South Africa, died 1983¹.

Phyllis Sellors née Roberts, born 26 January 1891 in Hoylake on the Wirral south of Liverpool, Cheshire, England, my maternal grandmother, Latin teacher and clergyman's wife, died 5 February 1973.

Sidney Lawrence, born 17 October 1895, my grandmother Phyllis' brother-in-law, having married her sister Elspeth (Betty), employee of an insurance company, joint manager with Betty of a small hotel, choir singer, died 11 June 1974.

Betty (Elspeth) Roberts (later Lawrence), born 1 December 1895 in Hoylake, Cheshire, England, teacher, co-owner of a small hotel, died 26 July 1994.

Eric Roberts, born 9 August 1897, my grandmother Phyllis' youngest sibling and only brother, from Hoylake, general practitioner and later gentleman farmer raising Dartmoor ponies, died 2 June 1994.

Herbert Herdina (originally Hrdina), born 22 November 1901 in Lockwitz, Saxony, Germany, my paternal grandfather, mountaineer, deputy managing director of the Nordkettenbahn cable car company in Innsbruck, died 13 October 1960.

Maria Herdina née Köchler, born 6 January 1903 in Vomp, Tirol, Austria, my paternal grandmother, mountaineer, housewife, died 20 November 1991.

John Herding (originally Johannes Herdina), born 24 April 1903 in Lockwitz, Saxony, Germany, younger brother of my grandfather Herbert Herdina, emigrated to the United States in 1928, graphic designer, settled in San Francisco, died 4 February 1976.

Erich Herdina, born on 4 February 1911 in Lockwitz, Saxony, Germany, emigrated to the United States with his older brother Johannes in 1928, but returned in 1932, electrician, died on 14 March 1974.

John and Phyllis Sellors' five daughters

Christine Sellors, born 24 May 1920 in Cape Town, South Africa, worked in catering logistics in Britain and South Africa, volunteer hospital car driver, died 24 December 1986.

¹ Unfortunately, I could not establish the exact date of his death.

Diana Sellors, born 14 February 1922 in Cape Town, South Africa, teacher and later headmistress at schools in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, subsequently teacher in Britain, celebrated her 103rd birthday in February 2025.

Elizabeth Sellors (later Herdina), born 9 October 1923 in Cape Town, South Africa, my mother, nursery school teacher and housewife, moved to live in Austria in 1953, died 7 April 2017.

Anna Sellors (later Tambling), born 9 December 1925 in Cape Town, South Africa, teacher, vicar's wife, bell ringer, died 12 May 2019.

Gwyneth Sellors (later Mehew), born 21 September 1928 in White Colne, Essex, England, teacher, died in January 1982.

The three children of Herbert and Maria

Kurt Herdina, born 20 June 1923 in Innsbruck, Austria, my father, drafted into the German "Luftwaffe" and paratroopers ("Fallschirmjäger") during the Second World War, student of architecture, building supervisor, died 24 June 2020.

Jolanda Herdina (later Stüssi), born 4 March 1925, housemaid, creator of naïve art, moved to live in Switzerland in 1948, died 2 October 2014.

Monika Herdina (later Aste), born 23 June 1945, office assistant, housewife, owner of a picture framing business, died 8 March 2000.

Other personalities

Karl Köchler (full name Karl Albert Thaddäus), brother of my grandmother Maria, born 1 April 1913 in Hötting, Innsbruck, drafted into the German Army's "Afrika Korps", tax advisor, died 16 November 2003.

Grete Bermann, my first mother-in-law, born 21 March 1921 in Innsbruck, Austria, accountant, died 4 July 2013.

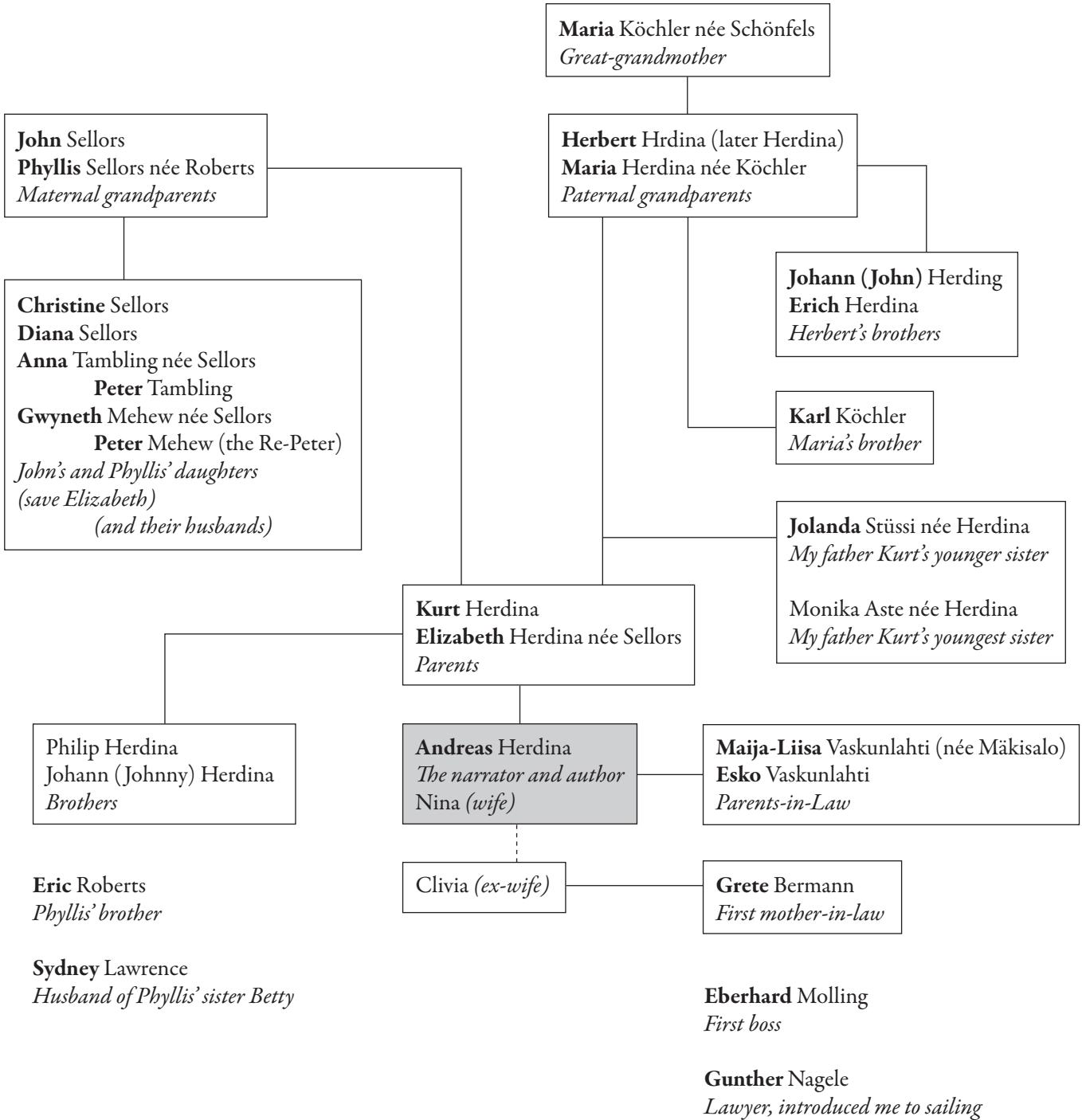
Eberhard Molling, my first boss, born 10 December 1927, lawyer, passionate hunter, Tyrolean patriot, died 2 November 1992.

Gunther Nagele, introduced me to sailing, born 6 September 1928, lawyer, died 17 June 2017.

Maija-Liisa Mäkisalo (later Vaskunlahti), mother-in-law, born 14 January 1933 in Savonlinna, South Savo district in south-eastern Finland, primary school principal, died 15 April 2025.

Esko Vaskunlahti, father-in-law, born 10 July 1930 in Kokemäki, Satakunta district in western Finland, entrepreneur and owner of a driving-school, died 28 August 2013.

Illustration of relations between persons mentioned above
(Corresponding to their appearance throughout the book, the names of the main characters of the family stories are spelt out in bold)



Chapter 1: Excursion to the origins of my ancestors and of other personalities in this book

Roots in Bohemia

My Austrian great-grandmother Maria came from the **Schönfels family**, which hailed from Bohemia.

Born on 26 February 1877, Maria was the first child of Josef Schönfels and his wife Maria with the recognisably Tyrolean maiden name Amhof. They had married on 16 May 1876. Although Maria Amhof's father was August von Schaffensteine from Kaltern in South Tyrol (now also known as Caldaro in the Italian Province of Alto Adige), she bore the surname of her mother Theresia Amhof, possibly due to the probably aristocratic August having sired her out of wedlock.

Her father Josef Schönfels' date of birth is unknown, yet his baptism in the Roman-Catholic church of Sonnenberg (now Vysluni in the Czech Republic) on 11 March 1848 is documented. He was an illegitimate child of Karolina Schönfels, who again had been the illegitimate child of Josefa Schönfels, all of Komotau (Chomotov). Interestingly, after having given birth to Karolina, Josefa acquired the surname of Herdina through a later marriage, which coincidentally is the surname of my German-born Austrian grandfather.

A Tyrolean peasant family

Maria Schönfels married into the **Köchler family** of small-holding farmers from the village of Vomp, some 40 kilometres east of the Tyrolean capital city Innsbruck, and near the old silver mining town of Schwaz. Parts of the family still farm there to this very day, raising a few cows and tending to some fields. They bear the traditional estate name “upper Gallen”².

On 21 August 1899, Maria, who then also lived in Vomp and was 22 years of age, married Franz Xaver Köchler, a man of 30 years, born on 20 October 1869 to the farmer Josef Köchler (born 1834) and his wife Maria née Huber.

I never got to know Maria's husband Franz. In Tirol, traditionally and by law, only the oldest son of the family inherited the farm, and the other siblings then needed to find employment elsewhere. Franz moved to Innsbruck and became a shop assistant (described in his death certificate by the unusual definition “Geschäftsdiener” – “shop servant”)³. He died on 13 September 1954, nine months after I was born, at the age of 85. My great-grandmother Maria died in 1966, nearly 90 years old, when I was twelve.

I only know of Maria that she once worked as a ticket maiden in one of the Innsbruck cinemas.

As if this was not in itself complicated enough, this ancestry includes a multitude of Marias, apart from the various Josefs:

- Maria Köchler, the wife of Josef Köchler and mother of Franz Xaver (4 generations above me)
- Maria Schönfels, the wife of Josef Schönfels (4 generations above me)

² “Bauer zum oberen Gallen”.

³ Another document gives him as tenant of an enterprise (“Wirtschaftspächter”).