

Vikram Seth, novelist, poet and travel writer, has produced a book about a journey of discovery into his family’s past.

His grandfather’s younger brother, known in the charming Indian idiom as Shanti Uncle, left India to study dentistry in Berlin in the 1930s. There he met Henny Caro, the daughter of his Jewish landlady. It was hardly a whirlwind romance, Shanti’s migration to England and then the war intervening, but eventually, in 1951, they married. An eccentric and childless couple, they welcomed 17-year-old Seth into their household when he went to London in 1969, and he maintained a close relationship with them for the rest of their lives.

It was at the suggestion of Seth’s mother that he started to plan a book about his great-uncle, widowed and becoming frail but still energetic enough to talk for long interview sessions over a period of five months in the mid 1990s. But what he discovered about Henny really rounded out the book. Starting with some letters and papers, he was able to discover the fates of her family and friends, who, unlike Henny, did not escape Germany before the beginning of the war.

Seth’s narrative is personal and powerful, a wonderful example of how an individual story can illuminate the huge, numbing narratives of history.