

# Don't Let Me Forget How To Say You

written by Carolyn Zaikowski | May 20, 2014



I remember an underground of things my father and his siblings pretended might be true about their parents. I never met my paternal grandparents and my father's generation hardly knew them, either. The oldest was a teenager when their parents died; the youngest, a toddler. As skilled gamblers, late at night over mounds of pennies and sticky silver dust from scratch tickets, my father and his siblings all took shots at filling in their own blanks. They argued with each other about those suspended, empty spaces between the assumed facts and the potential memories. They held on to all possible realities as if for the sake of some vague psychic survival.

My father, for instance, was convinced we were descended from Russian Cossacks. He demanded this, had such determination to push it into reality, to inscribe something tangible upon an unwieldy narrative space that seemed to haunt him. A space whose outlines seemed constructed of abject loss, of orphan-hood. It was as if he could not let himself forget how to say his parents into existence, and this was a tensely guarded secret, this fear of forgetting how to say. He showed me this, the only picture I've ever seen of my grandparents, waving it about like evidence, as if I wouldn't otherwise believe they had happened:



The photograph is folded and cracked; fuzzy paper acne from whatever it rubbed against decorates the center. It's got a slight sepia tint if you see it in person, but generally has dwindled into shades of grey. The story I was told about this photograph is that my grandparents were at a Liberace concert in Lowell, Massachusetts. I do not know the date but, if I assume the story is true, then based on Liberace's career span, the picture was probably taken around 1950.

But everything I was told about these two people was slurred. All accounts took place in the mill town of Lawrence, Massachusetts, one of the poorest and most crime-ridden small cities in the country, famous for the 1912 Bread and Roses strike—an unprecedented uprising led largely by women during the hells of a Massachusetts winter. Women who valiantly organized across barriers of at least twenty languages. I, perhaps wrongly, identify with this event, am proud to have some peripheral historical connection to it. Growing up, we celebrated it every year at the Bread and Roses festival near The Falls. The Falls is what we called the dam, still in use, that powered the mills. I was told my grandparents worked in the mills but I'm not sure what they made. Textiles? Boxes? Supplies for various war efforts?

As a child, I remember the sheer length of those brick mills, brick after ludicrous brick. Once vast holding containers for our national history's

sweatshops before we exported sweatshops, the mills became empty and decrepit through the sixties, seventies, and eighties. They are now undergoing urban renewal, re-constructed as upper-class, some morphing into expensive loft condos, others gradually being populated with law firms and medical offices.

Lawrence, since its founding, has always been one of the United States' foremost immigrant landings, now populated by first-generation Latino and Caribbean folks, then populated by the Eastern European, Italian, and Irish who'd arrived during the early twentieth century, many through Ellis Island. This latter wave included my part-Polish, but primarily Russian, immigrant mill-worker family. I never quite understood whether it was my grandparents or great-grandparents who emigrated, or whether my great-grandparents arrived together with their small children. I don't know who was responsible for my namesake and the Polish fraction of my blood. These parts of the story were told to me only in fits and belches.

My father's generation was not taught to speak Polish or Russian. Thus began the loss of two family languages and their particular powers as keepers of story. So many tellings fell into the void. Were these tellings jetsam, cast into the narrative sea on purpose to lighten someone's load, or flotsam, lost accidentally to the tide? From what I can tell, nobody in my grandparents' lives seemed to advocate for the translation of the past. Everything held by the old languages was locked away in favor of English. There seemed only to be room for facing forward, and just a few severely watered-down splinters of narrative slipped through to our collective memory.

This erasure of oral documents was a grand dying. Mental files were forever sealed regarding how my ancestors might have navigated various Russian revolutions or invasions of Poland; whether or not we still had relatives there; whether or not any of us might have been Jewish or Catholic, but converted to Protestantism out of fear or convenience. I am pretty sure my grandparents were Protestants.

Sometimes, when we erase and forget each other, it is intentional. Sometimes it is neutral, organic, an accident or cosmic inevitability. Sometimes, the storied archive, once embodied and lived by subjects, disbands. The pieces of story—smooth sand and rocks here, dangerous metal shards there—become objects held by those who come after, recalled by longer and longer distances and degrees till they unfurl. The sentences come to be identified no longer by the words but by the spaces between words. Then the demarcations themselves dismantle and, one day, we simply stop being able to keep each other. The testimony is undone. Its ingredients have been strewn back to time.

I visited Ellis Island once when I was ten or eleven. My recollection is that there were long rows of plaques—or were they walls?—that list thousands of immigrant surnames. There might have been a database where you could search your own. I can't recall; even my own memories are stretched-out, marred by plugged-up gaps. I know I combed through the Ellis Island surnames somehow, hyper-focused on finding Zaikowski, too young to be conscious of why I yearned for a record, for some proof of time and story, of existential presence. What I remember finding were about twenty different spellings of something probably pronounced Zaikowski, but no Zaikowski itself. Authorities

at Ellis Island famously changed the spellings of immigrant names so Anglo-Americans could say them. The memories that were accessible by, held within, such names thus largely became unavailable.

The one thing I know is what my grandparents look like in this photograph, but photographs are always so involved with framing, light, angles, poses, and performances. My grandfather, reputed to be a bastard and a drunk, is here glowing with something like joy. What strikes me most is the shape of his head. My grandfather's head is flat at the ends and bulging at the sides. A rectangle widened by its internment in biology. My grandmother appears elegant, wears jewelry. She seems as happy as him. I was told she was tall, a classic Eastern European beauty. Bending their heads into the fold, they appear to have love for each other, but perhaps that is just what I want to create for them from my shore here in the future.

I was told my grandmother died when my father was—nine? Ten? There were murmurs she died of a type of cancer, but it was unclear, seemingly even to my father. I think I remember hearing things like: she died of this cancer, of that one, a womanly cancer, ovary, breast, cervix, she was young, in her thirties, forties, fifties. There was talk of how much pain she experienced, how people heard her screaming from a triple-decker apartment in the then-Polish neighborhood of Lawrence.

I was told my grandfather gave up the children when she died; I think he sent the older two to the orphanage and the younger two to foster care. Whether this giving-up was because he was a bastard or because it was an impossible, unjust, poverty-ridden situation, or both, is uncertain. I was told he died a few years later, but I don't know how, or whether his children knew, either.

As a child, peering from behind rows of empty beer bottles at a broken oak table, the plastic placemats sticky with wine, I watched the gaming of my father and his siblings, somehow knowing to take my own spiritual notes for later reference. My impression was that, to them, memory's shadows, even if friendly or neutral, were always tortuous in that they were unseen. They wanted to give light to these shadows, even if the light was tinted with dubious colors. My aunt, for her part, insisted my father's report of the Cossacks was an absolute impossibility; putting down her drink, she declared this fiction must be laid to rest. This laying-to-rest meant something beyond the bounds of its content. Something like the sense of control inherent in believing your knowledge is dimensional and complete, your saying fluent.

I was told my grandmother was a writer and that, when her youngest child was born, he was four months premature and arrived suddenly and traumatically on the floor of a dingy Lawrence bedroom. The other kids cowered and watched. I was told she wrote an essay about this called "The Miracle Baby" that was published in *Reader's Digest*. I was told several times that she would have really loved me and that, because of her, I am a writer. From above their piles of pennies and lines of bottles, this was a potential memory they all basically consented to; one that, after a collective shrug of shoulders, felt reasonable enough to reconstruct from the stuff in the waves.

My father's generation is getting old. They are the last to hold, in however

flawed or fine a way, any direct experiences with the people in the picture, who had already surrendered—willingly or otherwise—the locked-in nuance and emotional syntax of their ethnic languages. His generation is the last who could even attempt to know whether or not that was really a Liberace concert, whether my grandparents' photogenic joy was simply an angle or accident of light, or what my grandfather's head was actually shaped like, so sealed in its temporal and biological cast. The stories about my grandparents, the mythical bastard and his Russian beauty, and all their grandparents before them, exist only as far as they were able to cling to those who attempted their telling.

But the telling has become an old, watery patchwork, nearly see-through. As adults, my brother and I have been long estranged from my father and his siblings. We only have whatever flotsam and jetsam made it to us from the disbanded narrative sea back when we were children.

Sometimes my brother and I casually acknowledge and try to navigate the hanging strings. My brother looked through some Lawrence city records and found a mill my grandfather must have worked at, an address he must have lived at, but the flow of information ended there. While wandering in a Lawrence cemetery, in one of my life's more uncanny moments, I chanced upon the grave of an unknown woman whose name was almost identical to mine. But my half-hearted internet searches of these kinds of names lead only to expensive ancestry scams, and I am ill-equipped, both practically and spiritually, for proper genealogical investigations.

Since it's likely my paternal family's narratives have been stretched too thin, have unspoken themselves so thoroughly as to be useless, I default to storing these narrative holes and other indeterminate historical shapes in back pockets of my mind. These pockets have an ancient quality. In them, I am very human, at a loss for how or why to plot paths to the incomplete, the mysterious, and the gone. These pockets are defined by a breath—the potential guiding path of the ghost. The ghost wants to be said, for this is the nature of ghosts. I am so wary of admitting to it: Ghost, I don't know how to say you. The saying of you has been lost. I'm so sorry. Whenever I try to tell the ghost this, it says back: Please don't forget how to say me.

My brother's only child—my nephew—is our one representative for a next generation. He does not bear our family name and currently knows no pieces of this tiny history we keep. I have seen one photograph of my paternal grandparents; he has seen none. He knows nothing of those shapes, that lighting, that fold, what music they might have just finished listening to, who might have had joy, or how the sepia faded, let alone why such folding and fading were permitted at all. When someday we tell him what we might know, the trickle-down of memory will have almost completely dried. Perhaps one or two disparate drops from this part of him will push forward. But mostly he'll have his own new shore on which to scatter narratives, in hopes they will be kept by someone as yet unknown, in hopes a new ocean will be spread out beyond him.

Sometimes stories are known and said into existence for the last time. This is a peculiar level of completion. That certain things, events, and people

leave permanently, leave permanently this earth, this shared human mind, is a fact that kneels restlessly in my gut. It is not edible. It feels incongruent with the survival tactic I have learned of writing and holding stories in order to keep reality tangible, trustworthy, bound and pinned to itself so my trek from birth to death will be a straight line. It is a true and utter permanence, this kind of exit. Sometimes there simply are no keepers of fathers and mothers and children. There is an ending to the ending and, after it, we never know who or what wasn't kept.

After these last tellings, there remains only the gap, the canyon, the blank page. We no longer know that the page ever had definition, letters, witnesses of its own who allowed its existence, who allowed the very possibility of a story. Then, someday, we cease to see even the blank page. It recedes into the ether, goes back to molecules. We no longer know that this ether was once shaped like a page, like a creature; that this creature understood itself from the inside; that it was filled with the tellings and syntax of a life. The border disappears behind itself. Even the ghost dies, and the condition of the ghost's death is that we will have forgotten it so thoroughly that we do not wave goodbye.