

Haunted by the Past

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If you are like me, a careful student of the past and a reflective observer of the present, you cannot help but notice some parallels between the two. Hearing about the recent deportations, imprisonments, loss of contact with loved ones, and people vanishing off the streets made me ponder upon my own troubled family history and inspired me to dig through genealogy to learn more about my ancestry.

My American-born husband makes it seem so easy: go online, find the baptism/marriage/ death records of your loved ones, and plug the new information into a genealogical tree. I was following his recommendations, but I quickly ran into unforeseen issues. In the part of Poland where I grew up, the family records were written in languages other than Polish—some were in Latin, others in Russian, and even German. Latin was used for all things church-related before 1800; Russian was for church records between 1800 and 1900; German was used during the same period but for official state and legal records; and Polish was used after 1900. And none of this was consistent, as each town, each parish, had its own unpredictable rules. One town might have baptism records in Polish, another one down the street would have them in Russian. Differences between the proper written language and phonetic/spoken versions make reading the records very difficult, even for those who consider those languages their mother tongue. And, if this was not enough, the geopolitical borders in my region have changed periodically in the past, making things even more difficult.

Growing up I kept hearing that we, on my dad's side of the family, didn't know where we came from. My dad always said that his dad, my grandpa, was very young when his father died, and therefore we have no knowledge of how, when, or from whom we acquired the land that we own.

Was it a part of the national partition of the country after World War I? Or did they buy the land and move there? And the most puzzling question of them all: why, in the beginning of the twentieth century, did my dad's family not speak our local dialect, but proper Polish? Why did they have a reputation to be well-off and respected?

I checked the records in parishes that are geographically the closest to my dad's hometown and—as far as I know—the residence of his father's family and found nothing. No records on my grandfather's baptism or those of his many siblings. I wasn't even able to verify the name of his father, my great-grandfather. It was as if they had never existed. To this day, all the records I find are contradictory and lead me nowhere. Consider this a part of growing up in a country where records, recordkeeping, and access to information has been inconsistent to say the least.

Current events made me wonder recently about the past from a new perspective. As a librarian I used to teach that, in some countries, it is safe to use .gov websites as reliable source

of information. As you can imagine, I no longer do that. Nowadays I pull up governmental websites to test my students' critical thinking skills. A great example is a press release on the US Department of Education's website from January 24, 2025, titled *U.S. Department of Education Ends Biden's Book Ban Hoax*.¹ I ask my students to analyze the document through the lens of appropriateness of the language, bias, merit. Does this read like a governmental publication? Can you use it as a reliable source of information in an academic setting?

On February 6, 2025, I came across a note on National Institute of Justice website:

The Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs is currently reviewing its website and materials in accordance with recent Executive Orders and related guidance. During this review, some pages and publications will be unavailable. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause.²

The information I was looking for was for a student who was working on a paper on immigrants as criminals. I don't know if the student requesting help in this matter was trying to prove or disprove the statement. As you all remember, similar messages were displayed across all federal websites. I remember thinking to myself: what will happen with uncomfortable pieces of information that don't align with the Executive Orders? And if this isn't censorship of information, what is?

Growing up, I knew which towns nearby were considered old Jewish towns. We, the kids, were always told that if there is a main square in town without a church, that most likely it used to be a Jewish town. Often the main part of the town was a square made up of local merchants or taverns. I remember my grandparents' stories about how if you wanted to buy shoes, you would go to this town; if you wanted to buy a horse, you went to that town; but to see a doctor, you would have to go to the big city. And when I say go, I mean walk—six, eight, fifteen kilometers. After I combed through the records of local parishes, I also checked the state capital city's archives, and I accidentally came across documents that present records of non- Roman-Catholic registry. Since our family has suspected that we might actually be Jewish, I had a glimmer of hope that some mention of our family might appear there. I still found nothing.

Both of my parents worked very long hours, so my mother's parents helped to raise my siblings and me. We had the most wonderful childhood filled with my grandmother's racuszki (Polish form of a pancake), homemade pasta and bread, but above all, their unconditional love and wisdom—and my grandfather's love for our land, his farm animals, and his rule not to allow himself breakfast until all of them were fed first.

My grandma, who taught me everything I know about cooking, never had a cookbook. She never had a "proper" cup designated for measuring dry or wet ingredients, because growing up, she never had all of the ingredients to make her food. She cooked with what she had, substituting what was not available with what she could grow or make. She made her own butter, baked her bread, and taught me how to make different kinds of noodles, crepes, and pickled vegetables. Because of her, I know when my pierogi dough is done, when it feels just right under my fingers, and not because I used the exact ratio of flour to water.

My grandparents were eight and five when World War II started. I remember them telling us stories that this or that house in town was occupied by Jewish families before WWII and that during the war they "disappeared," and nobody ever knew what happened to them. I still remember seeing those empty wooden cottages, dark, leaning towards the ground. I

honestly don't know how many of those families used to live in our town. I remember the curiosity and a level of discomfort that I felt walking by them.

Even with the passing of many decades after WWII, my grandparents were still traumatized by their childhood experiences, sharing their stories about hiding from the invaders, looking for forgotten frozen potatoes in the field so they could bring them home and cook. But they also told stories about foreign soldiers showing them the pictures of their kids, because they were seeing similarities in the faces in front of them and the ones they left home. And there were other not-so-wonderful stories, like the one my grandmother told us about saving an older cousin from sexual assault from a soldier. To this day my brother finds random objects in the family's yard: a button from a soldier's uniform, an old bullet from either a Russian or a German weapon. My grandparents didn't remember how many times the war's frontline was the immediate vicinity of our home. They just remembered the fear, the hunger, the cold.

Why am I writing about all of that? Jumping from stories on genealogy, to missing families and vacant homes, to wonderful childhood memories of home-cooked meals, to stories of horrors of a war?

I am the third post-WWII generation still reliving my grandparents' trauma, experiencing and dealing with my own post-communist generational trauma of censorship and Orwellian "walls have ears" fears, and, unfortunately, I am passing them to my children. Recently my childhood stories, my grandparents' stories, became more than just stories. They became our reality.

Every time I hear the news, I get flashbacks that bring me back to those emotional exchanges between adults I overheard as a little kid or direct stories told by my grandparents or other elders in my town. I can analyze any current event and draw a parallel to my family's past, my town's past.

Will our children and grandchildren have the same stories to tell their younger generations? Stories of neighbors who lived next door and suddenly disappeared without any trace? Stories about our own families whose records are nowhere to be found? I don't want my children to witness of any brutality against another human being. I am doing my very best to raise well-rounded, educated, kind people who will contribute to their communities and hopefully make them better. I am sharing with them my grandparents' stories so they can learn from our past without a need to experience these atrocities in their lifetimes.

The genocide in Poland was done by the hands of foreign decision-makers who wiped about 20 percent of the country's population in just six years. I know that my comparison is extreme as, technically speaking, the US immigrants are detained and deported, not exterminated. But they do vanish, disappearing from the fabric of our communities.

There are some very tragic similarities between my mother country's past and my family's past and the current state of things, like the mass propaganda campaign against specific groups of people, their vilification and mischaracterization, and the persistent dehumanization.

Believe me when I tell you from a personal experience: nobody leaves their loved ones, their homes, their language, their food, their traditions, their customs, and the places where the bones of their ancestors were laid to rest without leaving a piece of themselves behind. Those who came here, like myself, did not make their decisions to move, and stay, lightly.

Endnotes

- ¹ US Department of Education. 2025. "U.S. Department of Education Ends Biden's Book Ban Hoax." <https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-ends-bidens-book-ban-hoax>.
- ² National Institute of Justice, <https://nij.ojp.gov/>. Retrieved from February 6, 2025

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