

The Many Who Lived

"I hope that somebody will compile an elegant story from what I wrote..."

Mark Akiva Langsam, April 23, 1990

A few weeks ago, my father lent me a collection of my grandfather's writings. He had kept a diary all through his life, faithfully documenting each day, and now thousands of these pages sat in a grey checkered duffle bag at the foot of my bed. He'd died in 2003, when I was four years old. Left with only fleeting memories of a wiry man always in a black or brown suit, I was naturally curious to glimpse into his life. But I was also busy with a new job that demanded much of my time, and I figured I'd only have the chance to casually browse—perhaps pick up the odd story here and there to supplement my memories.

Instead, on reading the first page I was transported. The grandeur of the 20th century lay within my hands, the atmosphere and movement of that time described through a beautifully balanced interweaving of personal events—weddings, birthdays, funerals—with the era's broader political history—the First and Second World Wars, Nazism's rise and fall, the beginning of a multicultural Australia. Here was history in its true sense: not dates and figures to memorise for a school quiz, but a rich tapestry of life, of individuals competing and cooperating, of the fears, vanities, hopes and dreams that plague everyone from plumbers and salesmen to politicians and industry leaders. My grandfather's voice rang through all this, and his intention was clearly spelled out:

"The best legacy from parents and grandparents is clear vision. No black, grey, pink glasses to look at the environment and people. [Their children] will have to look to the future, learning from the past. Human nature did not change much in the last five thousand years, therefore not much should be expected for the next five thousand. Love, devotion, loyalty, sincerity, hate, treachery, jealousy and so on. The good thing to remember is the many who lived and got on well to a late age despite storms and upheavals."

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My grandfather was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1915, the youngest of five siblings. Being Jewish, he had his Hebrew name: Akiva Meir ben David Ariele (Akiva Meir, son of David Lion). In Australia he was called simply Mark Langsam. To certain business partners he went under the name "Ray", as this was what lay stencilled on the brick facade of his clothing factory when he bought it. For whatever reason, he never corrected their mistake. To the family, he was affectionately known as Kuba. To me he was Zaida—the Yiddish word for grandpa.

His first years were spent in the shadow of war. At the start of the 20th century Poland was not an independent country but instead split between Russia, Germany, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was to be one of the epicentres of the First World War. My grandfather writes that "many Jewish brothers found themselves in opposing armies if they happened to live in different parts of Poland. Sometimes it was enough for relatives to live a mile away and belong to another empire."

As the war raged on, the only work Zaida's father, my great-grandfather, could find was in a German metal factory in another town. Money became scant. Food was harder and harder to find. Zaida recalls what the local doctors told my great-grandmother: "Save your children—take them to the country, otherwise you will lose them one after another, like the Broufmaus, the Najdozfs, the Nowaks."

My grandfather, only an infant, and his sickly 16-year-old brother Moshe were thus sent away from inner-city Warsaw to the town of Bielsko. There they were taken in by a Polish family whose matriarch became something of a foster mother to my grandfather. She kept Zaida safe, as continental Europe burned with the fires of war.

Zaida's father returned from his stint at the factory in 1917. Soon he went to Bielsko to pick up his children. But there was a disagreement. Zaida writes: "My foster mother pleaded and begged: 'Leave the child here. He will be better off.' She implied that I would have unlimited opportunities [if raised] as a Christian instead of the misery of the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw."

And perhaps she was right; but no one could have known so far in advance the fate of the Polish Jews. So, wanting to reunite their family after all the years of separation, my great-grandparents returned to the Polish capital with their children.

Zaida never forgot his foster family. "Years after," he wrote, "I thought of going to Plock and Bielsko, to meet somebody from the family that did so much for me. But the short journey from Warsaw remained a dream for 65 years. Then it happened via a long flight from Australia, but too late to meet even one who knew the story of the Bielsko people's compassion."

Reading through the journals, missed reunification became a recurring motif. My grandfather wrote of so many people he wished to have met one last time. He tried to remember them all, and to honour them as best he could. The journals feature whole pages dedicated to those he'd known, praising their spirit, their passion, nullifying their wrongdoings—even if they would be forever separated by continents, separated by time.

I sensed a lot of guilt in these passages. And I was reminded of my own friendships, of all the people who—even at this young age—have slipped through the cracks of my life. I felt a kinship with my grandfather, who like me often wished he could hold onto everyone. But of course, life simply isn't like that. And for Zaida, this fact would become painfully apparent. Because, although he would never have predicted it, beneath the surface of daily life another war was bubbling, just as deadly as the first; one that would wreak havoc upon both Europe more broadly, as well as our family in particular.

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My grandfather depicts the period between World Wars with full knowledge of their immense importance. And again, the personal is interwoven with the political. The Spanish Flu storms through Europe, killing millions who had only just survived World War One; within the family, my grandfather's sister Sarah dies at the age of seven, followed a few years later by his brother Moshe at 22, the one who'd accompanied him to Bielsko. His older brother

Simon emigrates to Mexico, hoping to one day live in the United States. And Zaida, now growing into his own man, dreams of moving abroad himself.



Mark and Raya Langsam

“No one ever even mentioned Australia,” writes my grandfather. “If one knew about such a continent he would be crazy to mention it.... in the course of very limited studies Australia, Asia, Africa and all others except America (that is: North) were lumped together as countries taboo to the Jewish people as they were places where one was prone to lose his Jewishness.”

Zaida also writes about interwar-period Warsaw with great pride. His family’s flat had no electricity; the mercury could plummet to minus-25 celsius; he dubbed it “a city of hardship for many.” But he was happy to grow up in this urban European milieu, and believed that it truly measured up as one of Europe’s great cultural capitals, populated as it was by writers, sculptors, painters, and musicians.

Against this backdrop, upheaval was brewing. It had been only a precious few years since the Bolsheviks overthrew the Russian monarchy, an event of great interest to those living in Poland (in no small part due to the countries’ shared border). According to Zaida, Poles inclined towards fear of the communists, considering them scarcely different from the previous Russians who had warred with the Polish people for centuries. And yet many Jews were sympathetic to the Bolshevik cause, particularly because of the large number of Jewish leaders who made up the revolutionary ranks.

The Russian Revolution was also a harbinger for the grand political movements and ambitions that would characterise the middle of the 20th century. It must have been in response to such a time of upheaval that my grandfather, now a young and passionate urbanite, became

a communist himself. “Beautiful people are the ones who choose lifestyles of devotion, of work for others,” writes Zaida. “Nuns, teachers, nurses, clergy and communists.”

I came across a journal entry from 1990 in which he reflected on his politics and how they came to him. “There are two kinds of communists, one to give all, and one to take all. I think that I can be considered as one of the first lot. How could one in the thirties not be one? Even if in a small way, when fascism and Hitlerism were getting more powerful daily and war vapours could be smelled everywhere. We were not altogether blind to the authoritarianism and brutalities of Stalin and Stalinists, however we believed in all and everything to be mobilised against Hitlerism. The inexorable march of the swastika knights gave us all a feeling of black years to come.”

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During the 1920s, Zaida’s brother Simon moved from Mexico to New York for six short months before, upon an offer of permanent residency, he settled in Australia. His next task was to get Zaida a permit, so that he could follow. Meanwhile, Zaida was creating a life for himself in the old country. Only 21 years old, he had just married a woman from a well-to-do Russian Jewish family—Raya Bak, my grandmother. Born in Odessa, he describes her with love. “Raya carried this mysterious charm of Russia in every cell of her body. Her cells were of the same type as Lenin, Trotsky, Gorki, Mayakowski, Chaikovski, Mussorgsky.”

Additionally, Zaida’s parents had begun to fear his political radicalism, concerned that either he would get into trouble, or else cause the trouble himself. Fortunately it wasn’t long before Simon was able to secure the permit. And so to the antipodes, to the great foreign land down under, and to his older brother Simon, he departed. He writes that “with joy there was also sadness for leaving home, but it was clear to me that all the family would soon be in Australia too.”

His optimism that the family would soon follow was short lived. It was 1937 when he arrived; in a mere three years, Hitler would invade Poland. Zaida’s wife Raya, his brother Ben and Ben’s wife Pola were the only ones fortunate enough to make it to Australia. All those left in Poland—siblings, parents, cousins, and friends—were exterminated in the concentration camps at Treblinka, at Auschwitz, at Belzec.

What was the feeling like for Europeans at the time? Did they see the tragedy that lay waiting for them with jaws open?

“I did not believe that war would break out,” writes my grandfather. “This would be utter stupidity on part of the Germans, after their experience of 1914-1918 and the years following. Yet war came as early as 1939, only 21 years after the first ended. ’14-18 invalids were still roaming the streets on their crutches.”

As he began a new life in Australia, contact with everyone he’d known in Poland froze up. His political activities were for the time put on hold. He spent the next years working, desperate to earn enough to pay rent, to provide for his children, and to bring the family over from Poland.

Reflecting upon his early impressions of Australia, he wrote: “The years 1945 to ’59 were years of a large immigration of Europeans to Australia. Jewish, Polish and other victims of death camps—as well as their enemies: Nazis, fascists and similar elements. However the silent understanding was to leave bygones to be bygones. C’est la vie. To look into the future.”

He continues: “The atmosphere around then was of optimism, of a great future for Australia. A very different Australia to the isolated, rather narrow-minded Australia of the thirties.” I found this interesting, his description of Australia as a country transitioning from a colonial outpost, with the still-present anti-immigration White Australia policy, to a multicultural project, welcoming peoples from all over the world. That time seemed a more hopeful one, at least for the wave of immigrants coming to make a new home in this country.

Zaida embraced this country. He found himself a steady life. He opened a factory, a garment manufacturer on Little Collins Street that employed thirty workers. To compensate for this rather uncommunist impulse towards private enterprise, this lapse in ideology, he ensured his employees were registered to the respective union. He donated (or wasted, depending who you asked) much of his income to various organisations: the Australian Communist Party, the Jewish Holocaust Centre, local charity drives. One evening someone brought it to Zaida’s attention that, when he’d hung up his jacket during the day, one of the workers had stolen \$15 dollars from his pocket. Zaida’s response has become a classic story among the family, emblematic of his persona: “If my workers are so poor that they must steal \$15 dollars from my jacket pocket, then I must leave \$200 in there!”

On separate occasions in both the fifties and the seventies, when Cold War tensions and political radicalism fermented waves of Red Scare paranoia, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) took an interest in my grandpa. Thanks to freedom of information laws, my family was recently able to obtain their file on him, much to our pride. As the documents explained, the spooks had wiretapped the phones of *Tribune*—the official publication of the Communist Party of Australia—and then gone about gathering information on whomever called up. Being a subscriber, my grandfather was soon added to their list.

ASIO’s investigation was fairly benign. They followed him to a few meetings and then left him alone; there wasn’t much for them to trouble him over. Sure, he was proud of his beliefs; but he was much more committed to making his Australian life work. He raised his family, which grew to three children—my aunt, uncle, and father. He ran his factory, working with my seamstress grandmother who tried to take care of the income as best she could. He paid attention to world events and invested much energy in debating them. He attended synagogue regularly, although he was not terribly religious.

That being said, one of the pages of the ASIO file stuck out to me. It described the night of September 4, 1970, in which a group of Melbourne communists arranged a secret late-night meeting in the inner-city suburb of Parkville. An undercover ASIO officer who attended the meeting reported its location to be none other than the hall at the University High School. More than three decades later, I too would find myself at this same place, not for clandestine communist meet-ups, but rather as a bored student attending my regular school assemblies.

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Raya Langsam died in 1995, before my birth, before my mum and dad married. A chain smoker all her life, lung cancer ate her body away. She had been married to Zaida for sixty years—my grandfather was now alone.

Zaida was never really the same after this, and the journals reveal his later years to be marked by increasing erraticism and paranoia. Banal arguments turn friends into foes; local break-ins are taken as signs of Nazism's ugly return; doctor appointments allegedly betray the family's desires to institutionalise him. And during this period he often expresses feelings of sadness and failure, a contrast to the great idealistic romanticism of previous entries. His words betray moments of such loneliness which I can only assume any who reach old age must endure.



Mark Langsam and the author

“I am very sad about something, I don’t know what,” he writes. “Like a death of a very dear person. Who? Where? I don’t know. I can’t guess. I hope not Chorow or Marysia K, or Rube, or Berg. Feeling like a woman after the loss of her newly born baby. Of one who discovered that he was adopted by wonderful people 85 years ago. As if he came actually from an entirely different nation and a different very unfriendly religion.

“I am thirsty for sad, very sad music.”

But in the midst of this despair, there is a consolation. In 1998, I am born. And his journals are filled once again with a sense of wonder. For all the lives he lost, I became a sign for him that more were to come.

“Alexander the Great. The loveliest, greatest grandson one ever had. He loves using my walking stick to hit things. He tried on Sunday to smash [cousin] Josh’s photo on the wall. Could it be jealousy? Realising it’s not him, therefore destroy? Yes, I think it is so. Also a mark of intelligence at the age of 2 years and 4 months.”

I stumbled on this page and felt such joyful vanity. In my hands I held tangible proof that my grandfather, the man I never really knew, was proud of me. It was like the holy grail. Rarely are we allowed such unspoiled love; either people are too courteous, or time corrodes the innocence away.

In these diaries, I get to see my parents meeting for the first time. I get to see my own birth, and that of my siblings. I am given insight into a time before my life, and hints at many lives that came before mine. Reading Zaida’s words, I was struck by a strange and quite visceral intuition that I am balancing on a precipice. Ahead of me I see an empty gulf of future generations waiting to be given life, while behind me lies a thousand-mile stretch of ancestors, whose fossilised foundations raised me to where I am now. Every person sits on a mound of millions of corpses, atop men and women who fought and struggled their way through all that this world threw at them. Upon this bedrock, our only purpose is to perpetuate life before we disappear ourselves. To attend to life as if it were a flame—to keep watch over it while we can, until the next generation has their turn. To keep the candle burning, through good times and through bad, if only out of hope for what comes next.

Zaida’s diaries allowed me to talk to a man from another time, who died when I was only four, who has permeated my memory like a ghost. I would wake up, brew a coffee and spend weekend mornings reading a cornucopia of his writings; allowed access to the otherwise private inner-space of another man’s mind. A collection of stories detailing historical events, personal fears and jealousies, dreams of better futures, trips to the supermarket. Which is to say, all that is human.

As I neared the end, a sense of dread grew inside me. I knew it would not be long before I turned the last page and, in doing so, abandoned my grandfather to the past once again. But for a time I was privileged by his presence once again, and comforted by his words. I suppose, as Zaida said, “the good thing to remember is the many who lived...”