

Wrestling with the Bones
Truth, Transitions and Transformations in Family History
Writing

Submitted by:

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Abstract

This thesis enlarges on studies of truth-telling in life writing, to focus on the elusive nature of truth in the history of a family that has experienced the ruptures of war and migration. The unreliability of memory, the capriciousness of individual subjectivities and the complexity of intergenerational familial relationships can produce contradictory accounts in narratives of this kind. The process of constructing narratives about the past from individual accounts and historical research is problematised within a reflexive theoretical process that has explored the potential for arriving at a truth through such analysis. The thesis concludes that while the full reality of a family's past is necessarily unknowable, the process of critically examining that past can transform the presumed identities of the subjects.

The dialectical relationship between theory and practice is reflected in the structure of the thesis, where the family stories are interwoven with reflexive analytical chapters that inform and echo each other. A number of themes are explored in this search for a truth, including: methodological and ethical issues in life writing; qualitative changes in identity throughout life that might obscure the truth, the way images can inform and challenge the pursuit of truth; the problems inherent in the truth of any historical account; the significance of place to life memories; and the impenetrability of individual psyches when seeking to understand the actions and motivations of the subjects.

The pursuit of *the* truth fades in this mélange of perspectives, contributing to the *effect* of truth in the subjects' minds and the redevelopment of present tense narrative identities. The transitions and transformations experienced by the subjects demonstrate the potential benefits of life writing, the inherent need for some kind of truth, and the importance of individual, collective and relational experiences to a more multifaceted view of cultural memory and the construction of identity.


Statement of Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of this thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

Signed this day 14th April 2014



Elizabeth Suda

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Preface

This story has been lived through memory, postmemory¹ and through the process of construction, over a period of seven years, or perhaps even longer. Possibly a lifetime, or several lifetimes, as this is not just *my* story – this is also my mother's, father's, brothers' and extended family's story. There are no easy beginnings or endings.

When did this urge to add flesh to the bones of our incomplete family history really begin? I sought coherence and unity through the narrative process – a challenging task when the narrative is about a life that is still being lived. Life is unpredictable and contradictory and so, more often than not, slipperiness has been my rudder and disruption my sail.

When I first began this project as 'a project', with the title *Imagining the Past*, I hoped to find enough 'factual' information with which to create a credible story about my mother and grandmother – part autobiography, part history, part imaginative fiction – that would add flesh to what I perceived as the haunting spectre of my maternal grandmother's unknown fate.

The end result of this project has exceeded my imaginings and yielded a story that I would never have dared to conjure as a plausible imaginative account. The troubling process of the research and construction of the narrative demanded also to be heard. The open-ended nature of life writing, especially when the writing is of lives still being lived, allows for both surprising events and new insights. My subjectivities have changed over time – not only because of the work on this project, but also due to the exigencies of a life being lived. I want the reader to experience some of that life journey too: to participate in the curiosity, anticipation, questioning, discovery, confusion and elation that I have encountered during the life of this project.

In narrating my approach, and discussing some of the strategies I have deployed in attempting to find the truth of my history, I problematise the concept of verisimilitude, that is, the appearance of truth, in the life writing process. By adopting a self-reflexive strategy in the construction of narratives where

¹ Postmemory describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before-to experiences they *remember* only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up (Hirsch 2012:4).

assumptions can be challenged I engage the reader in the theoretical and ethical dilemmas that have confronted me, and the approach I have taken in trying to resolve them. While verisimilitude is ultimately an effect of each reader's experience of the text, I would like the reader to get a sense of the distance I have travelled by beginning where I started my exploration of my family's history – with a story called *Secrets*.

1. Secrets

Moe, February 1968

A crescent moon hangs from a silver thread of light in the sapphire sky. The summer song of cicadas is punctuated by dogs barking in the distance and the receding roar of a motorbike. I can feel the heat of the day radiating from the concrete steps, warming my bottom and easing its way down my legs and up my back. My head is prickly with sweat; rivulets of moisture trickle down the little trough behind my ears. My mother looks cool and fresh in her sleeveless cotton dress, with a headband lifting the curls from the nape of her neck. But a thin band of perspiration across her upper lip and droplets of perspiration on her forehead suggest she doesn't feel as cool as she looks.

We are sitting on the back steps of our house, seeking comfort in the faint breeze that accompanies the faded light of late evening. As we sit in silence, chomping on watermelon and trying not to dribble juice on our bare legs, we peer into the encroaching night each immersed in thoughts unknown to the other.

'Did you ever want a little sister or brother?' my mother suddenly asks me in Polish. She drops the watermelon peel into the bowl, and picks up another piece from the plate.

I am a little taken aback. I am the youngest child of three, the only daughter, and I have learned how to make a bow and arrows, play Cowboys and Indians, ride horses bareback and kick a football. My brothers often remind me of the privileges afforded to *mama* and *tata's* shining star. I am blessed with the best of all worlds; I am the fortunate recipient of a special kind of love reserved for little girls, while still being able to enjoy the physicality and adventure of hanging around with my brothers and their friends. My mother sews and knits beautiful dresses, skirts and cardigans for me, and has gone back to work to save money for my education, to fulfil my dream of going to university. Her question puts all this at risk.

'Sometimes I've thought it would be nice to have a sister, someone to look after,' I respond, then continue to gnaw on the remnant watermelon.

'Well, you know I can't have any more children. The operation finished that. I'm not a complete woman anymore.'

I involuntarily let out a heavy sigh, more out of confusion than relief. The thought of another child in the family has never occurred to me. Peter is five years older than me, and already working in Melbourne, and Henry is two years older and about to leave school. My mother is over forty, so I have assumed she hasn't planning to have another child.

'I didn't think you wanted another child.'

'Well, I could have had another child. Mrs. Rogowski and Mrs. Holaj had children when they were forty. They were happy. It would be nice to have another girl.'

Her voice trails off. I feel a little hurt, as if the one daughter I have been is not enough. Mrs. Holaj and Mrs. Rogowski both had daughters later in life giving them three daughters each.

The emergency hysterectomy my mother had the year before had been a traumatic event for us all. We were told that she had been close to death as she had lost so much blood both before and during the operation. In the months leading up to the operation a bucket of bloodied rags in the laundry had become a familiar sight, even though my mother would try to disguise the evidence by covering it over with a clean towel. The boys never mentioned the bucket, but I had always been drawn to it with a morbid curiosity. I would lift the cloth to examine the redness of the water – water that was thick and soupy from the clots. My mother simply soldiered on through all of this, despite my father pleading with her to go to the doctor.

'It will pass,' she would say. 'I'll go if it doesn't stop in two weeks.'

Finally, when she could barely lift herself out of bed, a thick towel wedged between her legs, my father helped her to the car and drove her to the doctor. She was rushed to hospital to be operated on immediately. We were not able to visit her as she had required several blood transfusions during and after the operation and was extremely weak.

'So you wanted a sister, not another brother?'

I shrug my shoulders but no words come out of my mouth. It doesn't seem to matter.

'I just feel different inside. As if I'm not a real woman anymore. People will be able to tell that I no longer have a womb. Do you think I look different?'

'I think you look just the same. You look nice.'

‘I have a big scar that goes from my belly button right down across my stomach.’

‘Does it still hurt?’

‘No, it doesn’t hurt, but it itches when it’s going to rain!’ She laughs at her own joke. ‘The good thing is that I don’t bleed anymore.’

‘I wish I didn’t bleed anymore.’ I reach for another piece of watermelon.

My mother has not been particularly forthcoming with explanations about menstruation, relegating it to the category of things one doesn’t talk about too much. Despite having seen the bloodied buckets of water, the first time I had detected blood on my underpants I was utterly terrified and ran screaming to my mother. It was only then that she gave me the most rudimentary explanation of what the blood meant.

‘This means that you are now a woman. It’s called *czotka* in Polish. I don’t know how you say it in English. Every month, *czotka* comes and cleans you out to keep you healthy.’

Although I knew that *czotka* means ‘aunty’ I had no concept of what the relationship might be, as I have no aunties or uncles. The blood is a terrifying red, and makes me feel unwell. I had wondered, are aunts like that? Hidden and never mentioned?

My mother lent me her old sanitary belt and explained how to maintain hygiene. End of lesson.

At school, when they needed to be excused, the girls would mutter: ‘Aunt Mary’s come to visit’. My *czotka* didn’t have a name so it took me some time to figure out we were talking about the same thing. It was but one of many times I felt like a *new* Australian. Other girls didn’t carry bloodied rags home from school to save money on sanitary napkins.

‘I always wanted a sister,’ my mother continues. ‘Instead I had a brother and had to chase after him all the time to make sure he didn’t hurt himself.’

‘He was a lot younger than you, wasn’t he?’

‘Yes, he was the spoilt baby of the family. Everything was Victor, Victor, Victor. He was cute and smart and got everything that he wanted. He was very spoiled.’

‘How much older were you?’

‘Ten years older. He was from the second marriage to Pavel Bogdanovich.’

A cool current of air gently fans over us; my skin tingles with anticipation, but then the heaviness of the day returns. Another motorbike roars down our street but my mother seems lost in her thoughts, smoothing the tea towel that lies in her lap.

‘Did you get things that you wanted?’

‘Oh, yes, I had nice things too. I had books, and nice clothes. We had more than other people. My mother could pick up the phone and get anything she wanted. She had contacts. Even if there was nothing in the shops, my mother could get nice shoes or a coat without too much trouble. She was a Party member. She had influence.’

‘Is that why the Germans took her away?’

She hesitates.

‘Yes, they were taking people from the Party, the intelligentsia and people they didn’t like. They took them to work camps. Some people said they got shot. I don’t think they shot women. I can’t imagine them shooting her. She was beautiful. She probably had to work hard, but...’

All of this is delivered in short bursts until she lets out a long heavy sigh.

‘I don’t know what happened to her.’

‘Do you think she died in the camp?’

My father has described the conditions in the German *Stalag* he was in as a prisoner of war, where the conditions were so bad many had died of hunger and diseases caused by poor hygiene. Typhus sounded particularly nasty because it produced a fever that caused the victim to shiver uncontrollably as if freezing but to also sweat profusely as if overheated. It didn’t sound like a nice way to die. I hope my grandmother didn’t die from typhus.

‘I want to believe that she survived and is alive somewhere in Russia. It’s better not to know.’

I have heard bits of these stories before while sitting around the kitchen table, listening to the radio, or playing board games and cards with my father and brothers while my mother knits or darns. We children are often treated to fragments of our parents’ lives while we eat our meals. The simple task of spreading butter on a piece of bread is accompanied by a story: ‘Back home,’ my father will say, ‘if you had sausage on your bread you didn’t have butter, never both at the same time.’ I would

watch with a mixture of admiration and disbelief as he bit into a slice of rye bread with the butter so thick he'd leave an imprint of his teeth.

The war, and my parents' time as prisoners of war and then displaced people, is a backdrop to every conversation; it is a mosaic of horror, deprivation, suffering and survival. Their past lives were lived in another world, completely different to our own. Their past was endured in order to begin a new life in Australia. Their suffering is made a lesson for us. We are meant to learn how fortunate we are to live in a free and wealthy country where such hardships need never be endured. We are meant to appreciate their sacrifice, their loss of family, country and culture – their life before coming to Australia – and be thankful for the comforts we enjoy.

Our maternal grandmother was a judge in Stalin's court and a member of the Communist Party. My mother was unable to locate her family during or after the war. The Iron Curtain had entrapped them, but my mother had escaped. It was not clear to us who was to blame for her family's disappearance – Hitler or Stalin. Both were described as cruel and bad men. My mother had recounted how my grandmother was expected to report to the central military offices in Rostov-na-Donu and register to go to a work camp. My mother had wanted to go with her but our grandmother wouldn't let her come – she had pushed her away and sent her home to look after her little brother. My mother went to work in Germany a few months later. Her life in Russia was something of a mystery to us, as if she was somehow ashamed of where she had come from, so I am surprised when she volunteers this information.

'You know I had a very good life in Russia before the war. I was going to school and I wanted to go to university. I liked chemistry. I wanted to be a chemist. But the war stopped all that.'

'Why didn't you go back to Russia after the war?'

'After my mother went to the work camp, I didn't want to stay by myself with my stepfather and brother. I didn't want to be the babysitter all the time, so I went to work in Germany. I thought it would be an adventure. I met your father there and we wanted to stay together. I desperately wanted to go home but he didn't want to go to Russia. He hated the communists. And he didn't want to take me back to his place, to that poverty. He knew that I wouldn't fit into the village. I was a city girl, educated and well dressed. I didn't know anything about farming or animals. I didn't

know anything about farms until I worked in Germany. I didn't want to live with all that mud and hard work. I was a city girl. I liked high heels and nice clothes.'

'And you didn't think to go home without him?'

'No. No, by the time we could go back the war was over for two years and we had been living together already. We had things. No, he said to me: "If you want to go home so badly you can take everything and go home but I'm not going there. I want to go far away from this place." I was in love. I wanted to stay with him.'

'Were you a communist?'

'That's all I knew. That's how I was brought up. I thought Lenin was God. I believed everything I was told. It wasn't until I got to Germany that I started hearing about all the bad things Stalin did. People disappeared, no one talked about it. You were too scared to talk about it. My mother never told me anything. At school, I learned that the enemies of the people had to be eradicated. Nobody talked about these things. A woman who lived in the basement underneath our house, she just disappeared one day. No one said anything.'

My mother is unusually talkative. It is as if I have become her confidante, but I feel a little uncomfortable with this new responsibility. It dawns on me that she might still be upset from the argument she'd had with my father earlier that evening. I was in another room, when I heard my father's raised voice.

'You shouldn't be working anyway, there's too much to do here in the house and the garden.' He was almost shouting and sounded upset. 'I can do some more overtime if we need more money. I don't want you to work.'

This was followed by the scrape of the chair on the linoleum and the slam of the screen door as he went outside. A short time later Henry had arrived home and announced that he was going to a mate's house after dinner.

The kitchen was hot with tension while we ate our meal. As soon as he had finished eating my father picked up his cigarettes and matches and went off to the lounge room.

'Why doesn't Dad want you to work?' I can't believe my boldness.

'Ah!' she sighs, waving the tea towel. 'I was stupid. I told him how Mr. Jenkins always waits to be served by me when he comes to buy his cheese and sausages, because he likes the way I explain what everything is. He doesn't know the difference between the *Kranska* and the Polish sausage. He wants to try different

things, and I help him decide. And then he paid me a compliment and said I spoke very good English. It made me feel good, you know... important... that he likes to talk to me. He's an engineer with the SEC, he's an educated man. Anyway... Dad got jealous. He doesn't like it when strange men speak to me.'

'Why is he jealous?'

'Your father thinks he is not good enough for me, because he didn't go to school and can't read. But he's very clever really. He has a very good memory. He remembers everything he hears on the television. He knows all sorts of things. But he gets jealous.'

I feel disloyal to my father listening to this. He is lying on the couch in front of the television, probably already asleep and sounding like the bulldozer he drives every day. I am sure that he wouldn't want me to know that he is worried some other man is interested in my mother. She has never talked like this before – about my father, about having more children, about enjoying the attention of other men.

'Is Mr. Jenkins handsome?'

'Oh, well, he comes all dressed up in his suit, after work. Yes, he's good-looking,' she says, almost coquettishly, but then checks herself. 'Don't be silly, he's just a customer!'

I long for another cool wisp of air, something to clear the air and change the scene. My mother reaches over and takes my hand, her voice even more confidential.

'You know, even though I had a good life and an education back home, I didn't have a happy family life like we have. I never felt loved. My mother was always busy, and at work or meetings. My stepfather was very affectionate towards his own son but never to me. My mother didn't really have time for me. We didn't sit and talk like this. She didn't tell me much about herself. I want to be a good mother. I want to give you all the love I never had. You're very precious to me, darling.'

She leans over and kisses me on the cheek, and gives me a hug. I should feel happy to be so loved, but instead all I am aware of is the watermelon in my stomach and a vague tightening around my head.

'A mother is always closer to her daughter,' she adds, compounding my discomfort.

I feel like I am encased in a giant cocoon – spun with love, lost desires and expectations. I want to gnaw a hole in the end to squeeze myself through, to breathe in clear air and exhale guilt. I want my wings to dry so I can fly beyond the crescent moon that hangs like a dagger in the indigo sky.

A dog barks in the distance. The night responds with silence.

2. A Tough Cookie

Moe, August 1999

‘That’s it. I’ve made my decision. I’m having the whole breast off. There’s nothing to talk about.’

These are the words my mother greets me with as I walk up the back steps of her house in Moe. She bustles merrily around the kitchen making me a cup of tea, then thrusts a bundle of brochures and papers into my hand.

‘I’ve read everything and I’ve made my decision.’

Three hours earlier she had rung me from the hospital to tell me she has breast cancer. She sounded frightened and vulnerable, on the verge of tears. This is her first serious health scare since her hysterectomy, some thirty years ago. She is generally fit and robust. My mother is fiercely independent and hates the thought of being a burden to her children, but she didn’t protest when I said I would leave work and be there within two hours.

Now her voice is firm and steady.

‘I can’t get the treatments at the hospital in Traralgon. I would have to go to Melbourne every day to have radiation and chemotherapy. I don’t want to do that. Anyway, the treatment makes your hair fall out. I’ve seen other people do this. No, I don’t want that. I’ll just have the whole breast off and be done with it.’

I read through the literature as swiftly as I can, and quickly try to ascertain the alternatives.

‘Having your breast removed is a big thing to do. It says here they remove the lymph gland and a lot of muscle. It will take some time to recover. You won’t be able to lift your arms.’

‘They offer home help,’ she counters, clearly having read every booklet.

‘Yes, that’s true, and I could come and stay with you, but there are other options. They can just remove the lump and the treatment only takes a few weeks. You can easily stay at my place. It’s not far to the Peter McCallum clinic. I can drive you.’

‘No, that’s too much trouble.’

‘Or you can catch the train and get a taxi home. These are not big issues.’

She is cheerfully resistant, adamant that her mind is made up.

‘I wouldn’t want to have my breast removed if I didn’t have to,’ I say, trying another tack. ‘It’s part of my identity as a woman.’

Her response is swift and dismissive.

‘I’m seventy-four. I’m a widow. No one is going to be looking at me. There’s nothing much there anyway,’ she says with a giggle. ‘I can just stuff some cotton wool in my bra!’

Despite my protests, she launches into a critique of her next-door neighbour’s son who had insisted that his wife not have her breast removed and instead drove her to Melbourne each time she needed to have treatments.

‘He was just thinking of himself. He put her through all that. She didn’t want that... to lose her hair and everything.’

There is no arguing with her. She has made up her mind. It is the simplest solution. I admire her bravery, but her refusal to engage with the physical and emotional scars of breast surgery puzzles me. My mother is a survivor of World War II and has no doubt faced greater challenges; however, her attitude towards her own sexuality has been a bone of contention between us for many years. I have long forgiven her for the values she tried to instil in me as a teenage girl – the sanctity of virginity and the lasciviousness of all men – but her denial of her relationship with her body unsettles me. It is as if the mastectomy is an act of revenge against her female body.

My brother Henry and his wife have similar conversations with her in the intervening weeks. Henry and I visit her doctor, and talk through the options, but the choice is hers, not ours.

Her mind is made up; however, the physical reality of the surgery is an entirely different matter. When the Monday morning of the operation arrives her bravado has evaporated. She stumbles around the house being uncharacteristically disorganised.

Henry has been on edge from the moment he arrived in the morning as well. He is in silent pacing mode. He feels something terrible is going to happen. He talks about the uncanny similarities in the timing of my mother’s operation and that of our father’s emergency surgery, some seventeen years ago, when he died on the operating table.

‘I was meant to go out onto a new rig, but delayed it until after Dad’s operation. The same thing is happening now. I’m meant to be starting this new job, but...’

By the time we arrive at the hospital we are all frightened. The gleaming linoleum and pastel coloured decor, the nurses in crisp uniforms, and stainless steel trolleys loaded with linen and trays of instruments all assume a sinister air. I half expect a blood-spattered body to appear at any moment, wheeled out from the operating theatre.

The reality of the hospital and the impending operation has dissolved my mother’s armour. It is as if her body has taken over and is resisting her decision. It doesn’t want to be in the hospital, doesn’t want to be anaesthetised. Her flesh dreads the surgeon’s knife, the gaping scar it will leave, and responds with uncontrollable trembling.

I help my mother undress and put on her nightdress and dressing-gown while Henry hovers behind the pale pink curtain. She surrenders meekly. She looks so small and frail in the hospital bed. The white sheets drain the colour from her face. The day before she had been moving smartly around the house chatting about ‘the girls’ from her tap dancing class, and whether she will have recovered enough to dance in the pre-Christmas festivities. Now she seems like a small elderly woman with wrinkled hands and tiny feet – feet that are too unstable to perform even a simple step, let alone the complex manoeuvre of a riff or shuffle.

‘We’ll be here when you come out,’ we assure her when the nurse says it is time to prepare her for the operation.

When we see the surgeon some hours later, he reports that all has gone well. We visit her briefly. She is attached to drips and drainage tubes and looks even paler than she did that morning. She smiles wanly and squeezes my hand. Henry face is set in a worried frown.

‘Don’t worry,’ she comforts us. ‘I’m a tough cookie.’

This is a favourite expression of hers. My mother prides herself on being strong and resilient. At this moment she looks anything but tough.

When we arrive in her ward the next morning she is sitting up in bed, smiling cheerfully, despite the drips and equipment still attached to her.

‘You go home now to Melbourne and look after your work and your children, and I will see you on Saturday. No need for both of you to be here every day.’

Henry appears to have contracted a virus, and is feeling unwell, but he insists that it will pass and that he is well enough to stay until I return on the weekend as planned.

Thursday 9th September 1999

These images have been streaming in and out of my consciousness since I returned to Melbourne on Tuesday evening – like a videotape stuck on a loop, except the sequence changes with each take. One minute I am stroking my mother's forehead and trying to help her calm down through focused breathing. In the next moment I am watching my brother's face in the waiting room as he pretends to read his book with eyes locked in the one position – he looks up, our eyes meet and we grimace at each other. The next moment finds Henry and I sitting in the lounge room of the family home on the Monday night – waiting, talking, hoping, being together and sharing our fears. My brother and I have not spent so much time together in our old family home, without the bustle of children and spouses, since we were young adults.

We reminisce about childhood days in the vacant blocks behind our house, riding horses bareback, running wild, and trying to fit in with the Australian kids. Our attachment to this house that our father built is very strong – it exudes everything that we have been. We can't imagine it belonging to anyone else, although neither of us would countenance ever living in it again. We talk about our father's funeral, the one that I missed, and how different it may have been had I been there. It is as if we are making up for lost time, talking urgently into the night. The conversation is not easy. Henry is tense and worried about so many things but I relish the time we spend together, reconnecting. When we part on the Tuesday evening the familial peck on the cheek is pregnant with understanding.

When my mother called me at work this morning to say she was being released from hospital earlier than expected due to a shortage of beds, my anxiety was replaced with anger at the hospital system. The women in the English as a Second Language class that I teach are engaged in a lively conversation about the newspaper article we are reading, but I am finding it hard to focus. I have absorbed my brother's sense of foreboding, his intuition that something terrible is going to happen.

At tea break I go to the office to see if there any messages. I press play on the answering machine. It's my brother Peter. He never rings me at work. His voice sounds faint and crackly.

'Liz, can you ring me on my mobile please. It's urgent. Something terrible has happened.'

My fingers are trembling as I dial his number. Peter is breathing heavily when he answers the phone. He's rushing to the car park. He's going to pick up his wife Therese from her workplace. There has been an accident. Henry has driven off the road three kilometres away from the hospital. Mum was in the car. She is back in hospital. Henry is dead. He was rushed to the emergency ward. They tried to save him. They didn't succeed. His heart has stopped beating. We don't know what happened. Yes, Mum is okay. Henry is not. Something terrible has happened.

I put the phone down. My body is shaking. The static in my head has turned into a raging storm. A howl of thunder fills the room and echoes off the walls. The building seems to be sinking into the foundations. The walls are heaving with the echoes of 'No, no, it can't be... this is not real.' I slump in the chair by the window, my mind exploding with questions that have no answer. The room bellows like a wounded animal. The walls weep. My eyes are dry. I need to get to the hospital in Traralgon. I need to see my mother, my brother. People appear. Somehow, my friend Helena is there. She will drive me. She will call my children's father. She will think for me. There will be a funeral.

Time has stopped and is simultaneously rushing ahead of itself. The past, the present and the future collide, vying with each other for a front row seat. The result is a splintering prism of images, thoughts and emotions. My brother is only 49. My mother has just had her breast removed. The hospital is located on a divided road. My brother had a flu-like virus. Which lane did the heart attack shoot down? Where did it land? He was fit and strong. He was restless. He was scared. He feared for the future. He was so hungry for talk during those days we spent together in our childhood home. We talked through the night – about love and marriage, life and death, our children, their future, our memories. Is there something I missed? Did he tell me he thought he was going to die? I reach out to connect one shard with another, but they disperse into reflected light. I have lost my wholeness. I am disconnected from that part of me that can make sense of what is going on.

When we arrive at the hospital I barely notice the linoleum, the pastel shades, or the trolleys full of linen and instruments. I am taken to a room where I am told I will find my mother. She is dressed in her going home outfit: loose comfortable trousers and shirt. Two women are sitting on either side of her in hospital issue armchairs. A vase of artificial flowers sits on the coffee table.

‘Oh, darling’, she rises from the chair slowly and moves towards me with open arms. ‘I’m so glad you are here.’ She embraces me, and I her.

My chest muscles tighten. I fear my heart might stop beating. She pulls away and begins to introduce me to her friends. I am struggling with the sensation that I am about to die, here in the hospital.

‘This is Jane. She works at the hospital. She’s been a wonderful help.’

Jane rises, takes my hand, and introduces herself as a social worker at the hospital. The other woman remains seated and looks first at me and then my mother.

‘And this is my guardian angel, Gail,’ my mother effuses, as if she’s introducing a lifelong friend. ‘This angel stopped her car to help me. She rang the ambulance and she has stayed with me the whole time. She’s been so wonderful, such an angel.’

Gail, a small compact woman with bright eyes, rises and takes my hand and mumbles something I can’t hear.

My mother is chatting about the lovely tea and biscuit she has been given, and what good care everyone has been taking of her. She’s recounting an adventure, filling in the detail, but the enthusiasm in her voice is artificial and shrill. I have to remind myself that she must be in extreme shock. She was with her son when he died. When a Polish woman she knew lost her son in a car accident my mother had been quite emotional.

‘I could never live through something like that. How can a mother live through something like that,’ she had said, wiping tears from her eyes in empathy with a woman she hardly knew.

When my father died I was on holiday in Indonesia, and had not been easily contactable. When I finally learned of his death the funeral was over, the grieving done. I rushed home to Australia and then drove straight to Moe. When I arrived my mother was in the garden, hoeing the potatoes – a job my father used to do. I had

come for a shared grieving experience, to be with my mother. But she embraced me with no sign of the devastating emotion I had anticipated.

‘It’s all over,’ she had said as she comforted me. ‘He’s gone. We have to go on living.’

Years later she told me that she had spent most of those early months in the garden talking to my father, asking his advice about how his garden should be tended. She said she could hear him criticising her hoeing skills.

‘Don’t do it like that!’ she had heard him say. ‘In the other direction, so you don’t cut the young potatoes.’

Each day she worked herself into exhaustion so she could sleep at night without him by her side. Her eyes were shrouded with grief.

I am partially relieved by her composure, but immensely concerned for her well-being. I still don’t know what happened. My mother appears to have no injuries but I can’t imagine how a car travelling at speed down a freeway can come to a neat halt when the driver has had a heart attack. I had seen the car parked in the median strip, facing oncoming traffic, as we drove in the direction of the hospital. I don’t know how it got there.

‘Your mother wanted to wait for you to arrive before seeing Henry again. Would you like to see him?’ The social worker has a well-trained voice of calmness.

‘Yes,’ I hear myself say. ‘It might make it more real. I still don’t know what happened.’

My mother starts to tell the story, the narrative I will hear repeated many times over the next few days, her voice rising as she comes to the part where the car leaves the road and she calls out: ‘Henry, where are you going!’

‘He came to pick me up. He had to wait a bit because they were still taking the drainage tubes out. Then we left. I was feeling alright. We started driving down the highway and Henry said he wasn’t feeling very well, and he was worried. He said: “I don’t know if I will be able to look after you.” I said, don’t worry, I’m okay, I’ll look after you. You can go to bed and rest. The next minute he’s driving off the road to the right into the middle section.’

My mother is standing and waving her hand to show the direction the car took as it went off the road.

‘I yelled, “Henry, where are you going!” And he stopped the car. His head fell back and he let out his last breath. I reached over and turned the engine off, and then I got out of the car and ran onto the road. And this angel stopped to help. She called the hospital, and the ambulance came. They tried to start his heart, but couldn’t. So they rushed him back to the hospital.’

My mother looks terrified now. Her eyes are wide with disbelief. I try to picture Henry slumped in the front seat, and her running out onto the freeway waving at the oncoming traffic.

‘It was terrible, so terrible. It’s such a shock. I don’t know how this could happen. What happened to him?’ She sits down in the chair for a moment, slightly dazed, and then stands again.

‘Come and see how he looks. I haven’t seen him since we came to the hospital.’ She beckons for me to follow her.

My mother takes my arm as we walk slowly down the corridor. The weight of her arm in mine communicates more than her words. She swallows hard, then says weakly,

‘We have to go on living. We have to live with this.’

Her chest is heaving as she clings to my arm and I can feel her summoning the scraps of resilience she has left.

Henry is lying on a steel bench, a piece of plastic pipe still thrust down his oesophagus. His eyes are closed, and his skin is grey and waxen. He is utterly stiff and lifeless, naked except for a pair of grey cotton boxer shorts. The social worker begins to explain what had happened.

‘They worked on him for about seven minutes at the scene, and then another twenty minutes here. They tried so hard to save him, but there was nothing they could do. Jan Jaszinski is an intensive care nurse. He said he knew your family, so he rang your brother Peter.’

This is the Latrobe Valley. The Polish community is like a large extended family. I barely remember Jan’s face, but he saw my brother’s ashen face for the first time in more than twenty years, he recognised him and tried to bring it back to life.

‘They did everything they could,’ she tries to reassure me.

My mother clutches my arm, and kisses the fingertips of her other hand and brushes Henry’s forehead.

My chest muscles tense again, but my heart continues to beat.

The door opens and Henry's wife, Kange, and his children, Melanie and Troy, burst into the room, tears pouring down their faces. I don't know how they got here, who brought them, how they found out, who told them the news. I had been so concerned for my mother, my brother, and myself, that I have not considered his wife and children. Their outpouring of grief is excruciating. He was husband, father, son, brother, son-in-law, brother-in-law, and friend. We hold each other in turn. I feel like I am drowning in the tears of others. Peter and Therese arrive, and their eyes fill with tears when they see Henry lying on the cold surface of the metal table.

My brother Henry remains motionless, like the husk of a giant cicada that has been abandoned. He's not here anymore. He has left his body and gone somewhere else. For the first time in many years I desperately want to believe in an afterlife. I want to believe his spirit has extracted itself from its human casing and flown away to the next stage of being.

No one in the room wants to let him go.

The next day my mother's friend Stan drives me back to the hospital to collect my mother's car, which is still parked where it was left in the median strip of the freeway a few kilometres from the hospital entrance. I will need to drive it home. In years to come my mother and I will have to sit in the driver's seat where Henry expelled his last breath, where he heard those last words from his mother: 'Henry, where are you going!'

The car is parked in front of a bush, the front wheels resting in the groove made by brakes coming to a sudden halt on gravel. Stan and I walk around the site, trying to work out where the car had left the road. We notice the wheel marks in a trough in the centre of the median strip and trace the diagonal line that the car took as it veered out of the left hand lane and into the right. The drive down into the trough and then up out of it would have slowed them down, but we are amazed that Henry hadn't driven out into the oncoming traffic on the other side of the median strip.

We come to the conclusion that he would have had to execute a skilful driving feat to correct his initial response to whatever sensation he was experiencing to make him drive off the road. His last act, before his last breath, was to save his mother's life.

How he did that we will never know. The doctors later told us it was not a heart attack, rather a 'heart event', like an electrical fault, his heart just stopped.

Later that day, Kange and the children ring me at my mother's house to ask if I can write a eulogy for Henry's funeral.

'We want it to be a celebration of Henry's life. We want there to be music and laughter. That's what he would have wanted,' Troy says, his voice hoarse from crying.

I look at the family photos on the mantelpiece in my mother's lounge room, taken just one month prior at Troy's 21st birthday party. Henry is wearing an evening suit and bow tie. He looks so handsome next to my mother in her sparkling dress.

I tell Troy and Melanie stories they have never heard about their father – how he loved to ride horses bareback, accepting any physical challenge that was presented to him. The past comes flooding back.

'We have to go on living,' my mother says when I finally put down the phone. She has been sitting next to me through the whole conversation, holding my hand.

'We have to be strong.'

She squeezes my hand, but there is little pressure in her fingers.

3. Raising the Curtain: the Author is Revealed

My brother's death was a surreal event that was difficult to process as it was happening. Writing about the incident years later caused me to reflect on the dreamlike quality of traumatic experience – when the excruciatingly real seems strangely unreal. To write about that episode I had to make it real again, and recreate images and feelings that I had pushed from my mind for many years. I realised that the reflective process of life writing, the actual practice, can be both therapeutic and illuminating. The deeply subjective nature of the account caused me to ponder upon my role as the author of this family story.

Theorists of life writing analyse the possibilities and limitations of a genre that appears to have many sub-genres within its increasingly broad categorisation.² The cross-disciplinary nature of these studies – which include literary, sociological, historical, anthropological, philosophical and psychological perspectives – allows for multi-layered interrogations of a literary form that claims real people living, and telling real lives, as its subject matter. In this thesis I adopt a multidisciplinary and reflexive approach that interrogates my own process in constructing these narratives. I engage with a range of perspectives that serve to both problematise and illuminate the possibilities for better understanding my family's past and its impact on future generations. In these reflexive spaces I investigate the nature of truth in the writing of family history, and how the author recreates the worlds of the subjects by locating them in real places and historical contexts that have their own stories to tell. I draw on visual evidence to help in these constructions and attempt to gain insight into the minds of my subjects by exploring the complex dynamics of the psyche and identity formation in the course of a life being lived.

The narrative I set out to write about my mother and grandmother has created a parallel tale, a reflexive analysis, which has come into being because of the imperative to write the first as truthfully and realistically as possible. The analytical chapters address the tension that exists between truth and realism in life narratives; what is not known cannot be *truthfully* represented in a narrative, yet the desire to write a compelling story invites fictional tropes.

² A sample few include: Second Generation Jewish writers (Freedman 2007); family detective narratives (Porter 2011); migrant women's autobiography (Zamborowska 1995), childhood trauma (Douglas 2010), stories about fathers, or patriographies (Mansfield 2013) and the broader genre of *Bildungsroman* that tells about the growing up or coming of age of a person.

The play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (Pirandello 1921) caused a minor furore when first staged, because it broke the fourth wall – the imaginary line that exists between the actors and audience – in a chaotic deconstruction of theatrical storytelling. Pirandello shatters the ‘realism’ of the theatre stage when six characters barge into the performance space after the play, which is about 3 characters rehearsing a play, has already commenced. The new characters demand to have their story told. An argument between the director and the invading characters ensues. Using the reflexive device of ‘a play within a play’, Pirandello challenges the boundaries between ‘illusion’ and ‘reality’, ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’, in theatrical storytelling. The effect of this disruption is that the audience paradoxically experiences a heightened sense of realism and, as if they are participants in a real life drama, feel that the play really has been disrupted by these poor souls who are tortured by a tragic tale. Pirandello (1925) described this performance as a defining moment in Italian theatre, marking the arrival of postmodernity and its reflexive microscope. Lionel Able refers to these techniques as metatheatre:

Any theatrical device can work metatheatrically if we sense in it a certain deliberate reflexiveness, a tendency to refer to itself or to its context in a more general mode: to theatre itself; to art, artifice, and illusion; and perhaps above all to language as such.

(Able 2003:133-35)

The reflexivity of metatheatrical approaches enables the audience to participate in another layer of storytelling. Such tropes are now recognisable to contemporary theatregoers. I have adopted a similarly reflexive approach to enhance my process, which is also a familiar literary trope, whereby the ‘realism’ of the story is disrupted by the appearance of the author.³ I want to emerge from between the lines of the text to explain my own process and theoretical explorations. In using the multidisciplinary lens of life writing theory to interrogate my own practice I hope to engage the reader in a more complex interpretation of the story that is recounted. I foreground the role of the author as the constructor of the narrative, as well as the

³ Binet (2012) uses the reflexive device to reveal his own subjectivities in recreating the events leading up to the assassination of SS leader Heydrich in *HHhH*. Mathews (1987) exposes the author’s subconscious as a device for writing the biography *Louisa*, while O’Brien (1990) uses ‘meta fiction’ in *The Things They Carried* by revealing that he has experienced the ‘fiction’ he recounts (Silberglieb, 2009). These authors disrupt the ‘illusion’ of the text by implicating their role in its construction.

subjectivities inherent in attempting to reassemble disparate and subjective accounts from family members and beyond.

I understand that a life story can only ever compile fragmented episodes from any life. The whole story can never be told, nor can it be told with omniscient clarity, but the stories we tell, and how we choose to tell them, profoundly impact on how they are read and what can be gained from their account. A reflexive space allows for the reader's interpretations and for the subjects of the narrative, including the author, to re-imagine themselves in the reading and, in the case of the author, the writing. The two stories that precede this chapter are fragments from the past that are separated by decades. Throughout this thesis the reader will travel backwards and forwards in time as I try to assemble fragments that are thematically connected, to create a life narrative about my mother, her mother, and my relationship to them. In this introductory chapter I explain the thematic and structural approach that I have adopted.

Thickening the plot

After my father's death, in 1982, I watched my mother change and realised how little I really knew her as a person, as an entity independent from her role as my mother. She became active in the wider community, beyond her circle of Polish friends. She went on a camping safari around Australia, and then to China and Hong Kong, with a local seniors' group. She joined a tap dancing class and had coffee with 'the girls'. She attended a Communications class to improve her written English, managed her house and huge garden, fought in the community battle to save (unsuccessfully) the Moe hospital, and grew flowers where there were once potatoes so there was always 'something nice' to put on her husband's grave. She buried her grief in activity, and created a new identity for herself – one she could never have had when my father was alive.

Henry's death sapped her of much of this energy. This time her grief expressed itself in the sluggishness of her movements, and the uncertainty of her step. She could no longer sing or dance. She stayed home more. A year after Henry's death, she returned to tap dancing classes, but never regained her earlier lightness. I have admired her resilience in the face of the loss of family and friends, and her ability to reinvent herself. I soon recognised that her ability to survive was bolstered by an

extraordinary capacity for denial, for burying that which causes pain. I had to acknowledge that I myself shared this facility for defensive denial, and that perhaps I was more like her than I imagined myself, or cared to be. Had I learned or inherited this trait from my mother, or her mother?

She lost her whole family during World War II but never really talked about them. There was a silence around this loss that has always puzzled me. It is as if she has emptied that part of her life of any meaning or significance. Her family was absent from our lives, and not just absent, unwelcome. She was dismissive of her little half brother, portraying him as the 'spoilt brat' who got whatever he wanted, while depicting herself as the ugly duckling or Cinderella-like figure, whose role was more akin to a servant or nanny. She expressed significant resentment in this regard.

As a child, I accepted these dismissals and imagined her life behind the Iron Curtain to have been sad and lonely. These rejections became less believable in later years, particularly when I had children of my own and reflected further on the complexities of familial bonds and generational inheritance. I realised that her relationship with her family was more complex than her reductive accounts suggested.

Shell shock

I wondered if my mother's dismissive attitude was a response to the trauma she had experienced during the war, and even before the war as a child who was raised in Stalin's Russia with a 'cold and distant' mother and stepfather. Did something else happen to create the 'silent wound' that is trauma, to make this part of her life 'unspeakable' or 'unrepresentable' as it can be for many victims (Gilmore 2001)? Could I help to unravel that knot through the writing process? Kaplan cautions against making generalised statements about the impact of trauma, reminding us that each individual responds differently to trauma in their lives.

How one reacts to a traumatic event depends on one's individual psychic history, on memories inevitably mixed with fantasies of prior catastrophes, and on the particular cultural and political context within which a catastrophe takes place, especially how it is managed by institutional forces.

(Kaplan 2005:1)

Kaplan argues that the experience of a trauma is connected with other experiences of trauma, and that each individual will navigate those connections differently. One

trauma can give rise to another, the wound is reopened and the current event can contain the effects of past traumas. Kaplan's argument offered some clues into my mother's strategy. She simply did not allow herself to re-experience that memory. I knew that I was on unstable ground in this arena as I was neither a psychotherapist nor a detached observer, if anyone ever can be. I understood that getting to this truth would also involve a deeper understanding of the social and cultural forces that were at work in her early life. How did her life in Russia connect with her experience in Germany, and how did that experience effect how she coped with what came after? My mother often talked about the time she had spent in Germany as forced labour, which was also very traumatic. She recounts the terror of her five day train trip from Rostov-na-Donu to Germany with vivid detail, as well as the slave like conditions at the brick factory where she worked for a few months. She kept a journal and cried herself to sleep every night for more than a year – the tears a clear indicator of her traumatised state. The post-war years in Germany in the Displaced Persons (DP) camps were also difficult and uncertain times. Resettling in Australia as a migrant with little English language, as well as being separated from her husband and caring for two children on her own for several years, was lonely and difficult. Each experience could open old wounds, unexamined traumas. The stories that she was able to tell became our shared family history and transmitted the impact of war into our cosy kitchen. I knew my parents had suffered, but had limited understanding of what that suffering meant.

The loss of our grandmother, and the rest of my mother's family, did not factor in our shared history. They were the forgotten people who existed before the war, in a land unlike our own. I have heard the same snippets about my mother's life in Russia over and over again; exotic morsels that somehow lack the details that made the other stories she told seem so real and true. A veil of secrecy, like our own family Iron Curtain, has shrouded key details and memories of my mother's life in Russia. The image of my grandmother in the back of a cattle truck, departing from Rostov-na-Donu in August 1942 to an unknown destination, is seared into my psyche as the source of this silence. Is it this trauma, the loss of her mother, which makes this past so impenetrable for my mother?

Mothers and daughters

By recording the stories my mother has told, and by delving further into her life, I have tried to create a connection with the past, with my ancestry and with the grandmother I never knew. I have been influenced by a number of feminist theorists of life writing, who have adopted a broad analytical framework that takes account of class, culture, ethnicity, ideology and gender in their analysis of life writing – in particular the life writing by, and about, women.⁴ These theorists challenged me to recognise my subjectivities, and through this process I learned more about the women who are contained within me.

As Carl Jung suggested, mothers and daughters are deeply connected:

Every mother contains her daughter within herself, and her daughter her mother...Everywoman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter. This participation and intermingling gives rise to that peculiar uncertainty as regards time: a woman lives earlier as a mother, later as a daughter.

(Jung 1969:162)

Mother–daughter relationships intersect and evolve throughout the course of a life. Adrienne Rich (1976) pointed to the limited attention given to the mother–daughter relationship in theology, art, sociology and psychoanalysis, and its centrality to women’s lives, for they share ‘a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, pre-verbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other’ (220). This relation was more powerfully understood when I realised that the egg that produced me was already in my mother’s body as she grew in her mother’s body; we women are connected at a macromolecular level, embodied within each other and subsequent female generations.

Feminist theorising has since made up for the dearth that Rich alluded to with significant works in sociology, anthropology, psychotherapy and autobiography.⁵ Marianne Hirsch, for example, seeks a ‘different confrontation between theory and individual experience’ (1981:214) through a textual analysis of literary representations of mothers and daughters. She refers to many works of literature that illustrate the complexity of mother–daughter relationships, which feminist

⁴ Smith and Watson (2001, 2011), Jelinek (1986), Gilmore (1994), Friedman (1988), Hirsch (1989, 2012), Benstock (1988), Giorgio (2002), and Steadman (1986) are representative of feminist discourses within studies of life writing.

⁵ Shrier, Tompsett & Shrier (2004) provide a review of some of that work.

writers have returned to with new eyes. Hirsch concludes that the mother–daughter story has been written ‘even if it has not been read’ (214). She extends this analysis in *The Mother Daughter Plot* (1989), where she opens the way to a ‘complex and vast enterprise of assessing how cultural difference impinges upon the configurations of the mother daughter relationship’ (Giorgio 2002:3). In so doing she invites an analysis that incorporates historical, social, cultural and economic perspectives.

Giorgio examines the specificities of fictional and autobiographical representations of the mother-daughter relationship in Western European countries. She analyses the shifts in focus in this body of writing – from the ‘putting the mother on trial’ genre, which judges the mother for being complicit in patriarchal hegemony, to the daughter’s ‘search for the self’ through the recuperation of her maternal heritage. The starting point of Giorgio’s account is the belief that ‘...psychic structures are bound up with historical, economic, political, social and cultural processes; specific to a certain community or group, and that a text or group of texts cannot be interpreted without reference to the forms of a specific literary tradition’ (6). The mother–daughter story has cultural specificities that are more fully mapped out and realised in individual stories.⁶ I want to explore those complexities in my own story.

Setting the scene

In *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Carolyn Steedman (1986) employed the analytical framework that Giorgio (2002) later advocates. Steedman attempts to make sense of her childhood in 1950s Streatham, England, where she was brought up in a working-class family that did not conform to the ‘cosy stereotypes’ that she regarded as one dimensional and incomplete (3). Steedman’s analysis of her mother’s behaviour pre-empted some of the questions I wanted to explore in fleshing out my mother’s childhood, and in better understanding my grandmother, Elisaveta, whom my mother always depicted as a rather stern and largely absent figure.

Steedman argued for a more complex analysis of how individual psychologies interact with the social, cultural, political and economic contexts of their physical

⁶ *Poppy* (Modjeska 1990), *A Very Easy Death* (De Beauvoir 1965), *My Mother was a Bag Lady* (Behmoiras 2007) and *Waiting Room: A Memoir* (Carey 2009) reflect a range of representations that illustrate this point.

location. As Steedman writes: '...the stories people tell about themselves in order to explain how they got to a place they currently inhabit, are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretative devices of a culture' (1986:16). The stories my mother told about herself barely reflected the trauma she must have experienced, while historical accounts of the times suggest a more dramatic scenario.

Steedman explores the tensions between individual perceptions of the self in a given context or landscape, and the supposedly objective historical interpretations that, she argues, generally fail to penetrate the deeper and more subtle aspects of human psychology. She makes the further argument that every individual will respond differently to the same circumstance, a point that Kaplan (2005) also stresses in terms of individual responses to trauma. The challenge in such explorations, according to Steedman (1986), is to resist the simplification of complex issues and inconsistencies that arise in the multifaceted domains of feminist historiography (24). She attempts to be transparent in her own subjectivities – positioning herself as both feminist and as critical historian.

One could easily assume that my mother's relationship with her mother is similar to the many other stories about women in post-revolutionary Russia, both fictional and historical. They were the products of a time of idealism and oppression, secrets and lies, ideology and dogma, the collectivisation of the social unit of the family, and the transformation of the role of women.⁷ One could extrapolate a psychological response to trauma or loss from an analysis of the totalitarian order in which their relationship took place, but there is clearly more to any individual story than this. Steedman's probing analysis of her own childhood revealed secrets that her mother had kept from her which helped her to understand her mother better. My own quest also has the potential to reveal secrets that challenge my mother's accounts.

Roger Porter (2011) identifies family detective narratives as a subgenre within life writing. In this genre, children, usually in middle age, uncover the secret lives of their fathers.⁸ These texts, Porter argues, are often autobiographical and focus on the

⁷ Fitzpatrick (1978) analyses archival documents that evidence these transformations, while Alliluyeva (1967) writes of her own experience as the daughter of Stalin and a mother who took her own life. Buckley (1989) and Bucher (2000) capture the individual voices of Russian women at this time.

⁸ Steedman (1986 & 1992), Winterson (2001 & 2011) and Summers (2009) uncovered secrets about their mothers, providing good models for consideration in my own work.

son's or daughter's 'active search' for the truth, for what has been withheld or concealed. 'Family sleuthing', he suggests, 'is an aspect of a broader autobiographical quest for identity' (4). Mansfield (2013) builds on this argument in his study of Australian patriography, 'the Son's Book of the Father' (Freadman 2003:177), and addresses the issue of relationality in men's autobiographical writing. Mansfield (2013) explores 'the distinctive conception of relational identity within the particularly masculine frame of patrimonial life narrative' (4). He offers due credit to feminist theories 'about relationality, autobiography and writing the body' (4) for paving the way for the men's analysis and writing about their fathers. However, the familial relational connections between fathers and sons and mothers and daughters can also extend beyond filial relationship to trans-generational connections.

In *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (Mendelsohn 2005), the author set out to solve a puzzle that had caused many uncomfortable silences in his family. Some members of his extended family would burst into tears whenever he entered the room due to his uncanny resemblance to his great uncle Shmiel, who was killed, along with his family, during World War Two. Mendelsohn's search was driven by a desire to find out what happened to these phantoms, and why they were never spoken about. His investigations resonate with my desire to find out what happened to my grandmother, her husband and son.

A haunted landscape

In shining an analytic torch on my mother's life, I seek to uncover a more detailed story that takes account of the specificities of the times and places that shaped my mother's and grandmother's lives. I want to fill the void ignorance of the past has created, to make a connection with my Russian ancestry and with my grandmother. I want to penetrate the zones of silence and give voice to the muted aspects of my history. In entering that unwritten place I have succumbed to primal urges that are difficult to fully articulate, but which suggest a sense of hauntedness.

Beizer (2009) provides an interesting thesis about feminist biographers of women whose lives have been lost to history, works she dubs as 'salvation biography' or 'resurrection biography' (6). She analyses the motivations and subjectivities of these authors and observes:

I was particularly struck by the ways in which the quest for foremothers, for many feminist biographers, New Historians and literary critics is personally motivated, becomes a search for the self and its biological maternal origins, and itself becomes part of the story. Biography and autobiography then fuse, often flirting with the fictional, blurring generic boundaries and creating an inter genre I named – ‘bio-autography’ – the writings of a self through the representation of another’s life.

(Beizer 2009: 5)

This search for the spiritual foremother, she argues, is a conflicted process where the ‘maternal phantoms’, once resurrected, are ‘alternately wrestled to the ground and embraced’ (6). Beizer’s observations spoke to my struggle in defining my own motivations and ‘bio-autographical’ approach, which I had not yet analysed.⁹ The concept of maternal phantoms who occupy a haunted landscape captures the otherworldly nature of my enterprise. The desire to attend to the ghosts of the past is addressed in psychoanalytic theory and therapeutic practice dealing with transgenerational trauma and family secrets. Davis explains:

Hauntology supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive. Attending to the ghost is an ethical injunction insofar as it occupies the place of the Levinasian Other: a wholly irrecoverable intrusion in our world, which is not comprehensible within our available intellectual frameworks, but whose otherness we are responsible for preserving.

(Davis 2005:373)

I have come to understand that the transgenerational transmission of trauma can express itself in many ways.¹⁰ What I initially described as ‘curiosity’ obviously has a deeper source. The psychoanalytical work on mother-daughter relationships suggests that there is a search for the self in the mother’s story. The imperative that drove my explorations initially arose from unexplored ideas and emotions that appeared to have no source. The process of research and writing has caused me to reflect more deeply on a number of issues. My children, for example, have a very close relationship with their grandmother, who bathed, fed and played with them as children and who now knows them very well as adults. She is their *Babcia*. I have

⁹ The semantics of identification and categorization of a clearly defined genre as being either memoir, auto/biography, bio-autographical, or in the case of filial connections, patriography or matriography (Mansfield 2013), or as Gerard (2013) prefers, matremoir or patremoir is of less interest in this discussion than the narratological components and intentions/motivations from which they derive.

¹⁰ This issue is discussed in more detail in chapter 25 of this thesis.

never known this kind of relationship, as my grandmother was neither present in nor absent from my life. My mother's refusal to confront what might have happened to her meant that my grandmother was neither dead nor alive. Perhaps she lived, somewhere behind the Iron Curtain. Davis's account of hauntology is pertinent here. He writes of an interest in 'trans-generational communication',

particularly the way in which the undisclosed traumas of previous generations might disturb the lives of their descendants even and especially if they know nothing about their distant causes. What they call a phantom is the presence of a dead ancestor in the living Ego, still intent on preventing its traumatic and usually shameful secrets from coming to light.

(Davis 2005:374)

While I now know many of the secrets that may have haunted me in my childhood, my mother's relationship with her own mother is still problematic – as suggested in the story, *Secrets*. A combination of admiration, resentment and judgment infuse my mother's words when she refers to her mother's life as a judge in Stalin's court. Many of these verdicts have been shaped after the fact, with the benefit of hindsight and the public exposure of Stalin's totalitarian practices. Her mother has been put on trial for complicity with the Stalinist patriarchal hegemony. She does not deserve a place in her granddaughter's life; she put allegiance to the cause before her own daughter's happiness. These words have never been articulated by my mother, but represent one reading of how I might view Elisaveta's demotion of status in our lives.

Interviews with Soviet women after World War II illustrate the predicament for women who were devoted to the cause of socialism and who also wanted to get ahead in the system during the 1920s and 1930s (Bucher 2000:144). The promise of emancipation and equality were powerful motivating forces. The traditional role of women as homemakers was supplanted by the quest for a new world order of egalitarian comradeship. Elisaveta had taken advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves, but in so doing seemed to have compromised her relationship with her daughter and her own mother. Was she eliminated from our lives because of her failures as a mother, or because she was a Soviet apparatchik and therefore not a relative one could be proud of in the Polish Catholic Diaspora of the Latrobe Valley? Both or neither of these options may be true.

Many questions demand an answer. Who was Elisaveta Nodel Bogdanovich; this grandmother whose name (Elisabeth) I bear? What sort of person was she? What was her approach to the exigencies of life in post-revolutionary Russia? What sort of mother was she? And what happened to her after she was taken from Rostov-na-Donu, in that truck filled with others, in August 1942? Why did my mother try to erase that part of her life history? Was it because she felt unloved, or is there a more complex explanation for this erasure? These questions, hitherto unformed, have haunted the realm of postmemory, waiting to be addressed. Is it possible to go back in time and recover these lost stories, to fill in the gaps and make the past seem more coherent and understandable? And how should one begin such an exploration?

Problematising the practice

Initially I set out to construct a series of thematic narratives that, when connected, might provide answers to my questions. I wanted to take my mother back in time to recover memories through a process of active and structured discussion – to involve her in the verification of my representations. While I understood the limitations of such memory work,¹¹ the intention was to use historical and fictional accounts of life in Russia as a prompt for retrieving memories. I thought a more analytical approach might produce a more likely account.

We read the autobiographical stories of others, including the memoirs of Susan Varga (2000), Raimond Gaita (1998), Richard Freadman (2003), Lily Brett (1999, 2002), Peter Singer (2003), Stalin's daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva (1967), Olga Morozova (2004), and several books by Sholokhov (1934) to recapture memories of the River Don region, where she lived, and to stimulate conversation that might prompt memory.

I have revisited many of the family stories we were told as children with my mother, and reconstructed them as fictional accounts. These stories were our shared family history/mythology. They formed my identity as the daughter of post-war Polish migrants to Australia. I was the Second Generation migrant who felt the need to colour in the sketches of her mother's life to see what else they might

¹¹ The unreliability of individual memories and collective memories is well documented in the literature on life writing. Mary McCarthy's work (1957) is often cited as an example of the issues regarding the believability of memory in life narratives. Gilmore (1994:106-131) elaborates this discussion.

reveal. I naïvely believed that the task ahead was a straightforward case of adding flesh to the bones of incomplete stories using fiction as a reconstructive tool; I would systematically interview my mother with a clear purpose, as Varga (2000) did, and elicit the details that seemed to be lacking. From there I could fill in the gaps with historical research and general research on the times and places where she had lived. I approached the task as a novelist of historical fiction might proceed, expecting that my process would educe stories that rang true; however, the limitations of memory proved to be a stumbling block, as few new insights emerged from our reconstructions.

Halbwachs' work on collective memories is instructive here, as he says:

Recollections which have not been thought about for a long time are reproduced without change, but when reflection begins to operate, when instead of letting the past recur, we reconstruct it through an effort of reasoning, what happens is that we distort the past, because we wish to gain greater coherence.

(Halbwachs 1992:183)

The desire for a coherent narrative with a sequential cause and effect storyline distorts how the past is remembered. My mother stuck closely to her well-rehearsed script of stories and details she had recounted many times before save for a few exceptions. Halbwachs' (1992) notion of collective memory provides some insight into this phenomenon. He writes: 'It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognise and localise their memories' (34). Collective memories are created in community and in place. My mother had no collective memories upon which to draw when trying to reconstruct an account of her life in Russia, so it is not surprising that these memories are hazier.

A further challenge was that in order to reconstruct memories of her early life she had to connect with the place and people that she had lost. She had to remove the iron curtain of denial that had protected her from reliving those traumas over and over again. As Kaplan (2005) suggests, the reliving of traumatic events can be triggered by the faintest prompt of memory. Bakhtin suggests an added complexity:

Each person's inner world and thought has its stabilized social audience that comprises the environment in which reasons, motives, values and so on are fashioned...I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view ultimately from the point of view of the community to which I belong.

(Bakhtin, in Volosinov, 1986:86)

For my mother the 'stabilized social audience' of her childhood was obliterated. As far as she was concerned it was another life, another world, which could not be retrieved. The idea of going back was too painful. She was afraid of what she might feel in retrieving those childhood memories. It was easier not to remember.

The ethical, moral and philosophical issues surrounding such representations became more and more problematic the further I got into the project.¹² The borderline between 'being true' and 'ringing true' became a significant issue of contention. Representing 'the truth' in any account of a person's life is inherently problematical, and especially so when there are multiple participants and informants. The complexities of being author and subject, daughter and granddaughter, the outsider looking in and the insider looking out, provided fertile ground for a reflexive and theoretical examination of how such a narrative might be constructed. By creating a space where the dialectical relationship between the theory and practice of life writing could be explored I thought I could address and resolve some of those issues, or at least enhance my credibility as an author who is committed to honouring the '*pacte autobiographique*' (Lejeune 1975) by being as honest as possible in my interpretations and constructions.

While Dow Adams once argued 'most scholars have come to agree that the presence of fiction within autobiography is no more problematic than the presence of nonfiction within the novel' (1994:459), he later acknowledges that the unreliability of truth in the life writing process has continued to preoccupy theorists of life writing (Dow Adams 2009:342). Whether the distortions of truth are wilful or unconscious, their inevitability in any work of life writing complicates the relationship between writer and reader.¹³ While the life writer may promise to write about real people and events, the 'realness' of any account is the subject of much contention.¹⁴

¹² Eakin (2004) addresses some of these issues in *The Ethics of Life Writing*, while Margalit (2002) discusses the ethics of remembering. Grinblat (2002) sees herself as a 'custodian of history' (4). Each intimates the burden of responsibility the writer faces.

¹³ Continuing discussions about the Wilkormirski (1996) scandal illustrate the sensitivities around this issue. Gross and Hoffman (2004) provide a comprehensive analysis of Wilkormirski's fraudulent memoir where he claims to be a child victim of the Holocaust. They argue that, on one level, he believed his own fictional constructions.

¹⁴ Baudrillard (1983), for example, argues that contemporary forms of communication, particularly through the media, have become simulations of the real. The signs and symbols we consume are mere representations, what he calls 'hyper real' symbols, of a real that doesn't actually exist.

Writing for real

Resolving the dilemma of authenticity is complex, because, as Bourdieu (1986) suggests, to construct a story about an individual life as if there were a neat beginning and end creates a 'rhetorical illusion' (in du Guy et al 2000:299-305) rather than a true account. It is easier, he argued, to attribute conscious intention to a subject's actions with the benefit of hindsight and imagination, 'motivated by a concern to give meaning, to rationalize, to show the inherent logic both for the past and the future' (300). But this is not how reality is actually experienced. The way we give meaning to our lives and the individual events in our lives is forever unfolding and open to change. The challenge in any account of a life is to allow for the shifting boundaries of the narrative self, to try to represent multiple interpretations and to make those readings provisional of other perspectives.

Sprinker refers to autobiographical writing as a fiction because 'concepts of subject, self and author collapse into the act of producing a text' (Sprinker in Olney 1980:342) highlighting, as Hayden White (1987) so carefully outlined, the opacity of truth claims in any narrative form. According to White, writers are always engaged in a process of constructing a narrative that engages the reader in their representation of the subject. Sprinker further destabilises the idea of autobiographical truth by suggesting that the author makes the reader complicit in the process of writing the text so that 'the ordinary exteriority of reader to text is overcome by the pure interiority achieved in the production of the text itself' (Sprinker 1983:153).

While this observation may have caused Sprinker to ultimately declare the 'end of autobiography', Bakhtin's theories on the dialogic nature of the novel and the relationship between author, subject and reader, offers an alternative path to considering this dilemma. He writes: 'To express oneself means to make oneself an object for another and for oneself' (Bakhtin 1986: 110). For Bakhtin, the 'self/other' relationship in the novel is inherently dialogical. More than this, the meaning of the utterances exchanged is entirely dependent on context.

For Bakhtin, language only 'means' when there is somebody talking to somebody else, even when that somebody is one's own inner addressee. The 'word' or 'utterance' is not based on a neutral set of rules, a word 'excised from dialogue and

taken for the norm' (Bakhtin 1986:213), but rather an utterance that is 'saturated' with individual meaning in the 'world symposium' in which different ideologies and points of view, from the family, society and cultures, interact in the creation of meaning. Bakhtin's view that all meaning is created within a given context, 'when two actual people are talking to each other in a specific dialogue at a particular time, and in a particular place' (Holquist 1981:xx), is of particular interest here. Such specificity ensures that the word is completely open to interpretation and deconstruction. The reader brings their own experience to the text and constructs their own meaning. The writer, as reader of their own text, also brings new meanings and interpretations through the inner addressee. The text is constructed and reconstructed in each reading.

As readers, we come to the text with certain expectations. We want to engage in a dialogue with the writer, to be seduced by the story, by the 'pleasure of the text' (Barthes 1975), by the pleasure we experience in the beauty of the pain and sorrow that is a part of life – an experience that the French word *jouissance*¹⁵ seems to best describe. When I read life stories I expect that what I am reading is true, mostly aware that the writer employs poetic license to make the story enjoyable for me to read. We know the walls of my office did not weep when I heard the news of my brother, but that image captures, I hope, how I felt. Readers willingly enter the 'fictional worlds' (Dolezel 1998:3) of true stories just as I had to re-enter the experience of my brother's death to write the story. I turned the real into a fictional event. This I think is the actual tension in the life writing process. We know the story is not the same as the event, but we want to capture the *experience* of that moment. Empathy becomes our primary means of communication, fictional tropes our tools for representation.

Popkin (2005) suggests that life writing offers the reader insight into a world that they would not otherwise inhabit, and provides the vicarious experience of living life in someone else's mind and sensibility. To achieve this virtual experience for the reader, the writer must construct a believable world inhabited by genuine characters and events (Dolezel 1998, White 1982). By their very nature such texts

¹⁵ *Jouissance* – French concept not directly translatable into the English but connotes extreme pleasure. At its furthest extreme it can become painful or induce suffering. In *The Pleasure of the Text* Barthes (1975) cites it as one of two textual effects, alongside pleasure.

are fictional artefacts of the author's imagination. Even the author is vicariously re-experiencing the event through the act of writing. My desire to reconstruct stories from my mother's life, using fictional techniques, is therefore fraught with complexity and ethical dilemmas. The reflexive theoretical discussions that interweave the fictionalised stories in this thesis seek to address some of these concerns through critical enquiry.

Verisimilitude versus the truth

I realise that *absolute* truth is impossible to achieve in such an endeavour, given the subjectivities inherent in any interpretation or analysis, but I proceed in the belief that there is a truth, that some of it may be available to me, and that I can get closer to that truth through this process. The preceding statement invites the question: what do we mean when we say something is true, truer, closer to the truth, or a version of the truth?

The concept of truth is fundamental to both epistemology and ontology and so has been the subject of much philosophical interrogation. The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Glanzberg 2013)¹⁶ provides an overview of the history of this enquiry, which has at its core the correspondence theory of truth. 'The basic idea of the correspondence theory is that what we believe or say is true if it corresponds to the way things actually are – to the facts' (Glanzberg 2013). This suggests the existence of a truth that mirrors a concrete incontrovertible fact in the real world; however, conceptions of truth change over time, and in the area of scientific enquiry many a hypothesis has been proven to be untrue. This has led some philosophers to argue that 'a theory of truth is a theory of truth conditions' (Glanzberg 2013).

In the social sciences and literary studies, truth conditions take into account the complexities of social, psychological, political, economic, cultural and linguistic processes and influences, which is the approach I have tended towards in this thesis, seeking multiple perspectives to illuminate my truth. While I yearn for a concrete image of truth, with direct correspondence to events in the past that I can nail to the wall as a 'true' representation I have grudgingly accepted that such an outcome was never possible.

¹⁶ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth/> (accessed August 2013)

Sheila Fitzpatrick (2010) reflects on the nature of truth in her autobiographical writing; she has a 'bad moment' (8) when she discovers that her emotional attachment to certain truths about her father are not borne out by facts. She wonders if such subjective errors might have implications for how historians interpret 'the facts' but concludes, 'Luckily that's something for me to worry about later, once I get back to writing history' (8) – suggesting that 'emotional' truths are acceptable in autobiography but not in history. Later she adds: 'I have done my best to gather the clues and give the reader, as well as myself, the possibility of imagining it' (8), acknowledging the *pacte autobiographique* (Lejeune 1975) in which the writer makes a commitment to the reader that what they are reading is what actually happened, and that what the writer says they feel is what they actually felt (Eakin 2004: 2). The pact is based on trust, the ethical commitment to being as truthful as possible. At the very least, there is the promise of the writer's own *emotional* truth.

My belief that a truth exists – that things actually happened in the real world of the past; that people acted in certain ways according to their character, the situation, the choices available, their individual psychology, their feelings and so forth; and that they made decisions that were motivated by specific causal factors, or they failed to act, and so on – drives the creation of the fictional narratives. There is a truth, but in many cases I don't know what it is and it is unlikely I can ever fully know it, hence my interest in the value of reasoning, imagination and verisimilitude as a means of exploring the circumstances surrounding the actions of my subjects.

Verisimilitude is equally problematical in my life writing process because, whichever historical or postmemorial understandings I bring to the task, my recreations are fictions based on reasoned interpretations. Barthes (1986) argues that reality 'could in no way contaminate verisimilitude...because verisimilitude is never anything but *opinable*' (147), a 'referential illusion', because reality can never be fully captured in all its complexity and possible meanings. Modernity, he argues, has created its own aesthetic where reality is described as if it is a concrete representation of a real world with a prescribed socio-historical context. The 'cultural rules of representation' strip the object of significance in its relationship to the subject (145). Barthes argues that this 'reality effect' (148) obscures the 'mythologies' (ideologies) of the dominant order, and implies a natural order of

things that is incontestable. Barthes problematises the nature of truth in the fictional trope of verisimilitude.

Because verisimilitude means that a representation is very similar to, or has the appearance of, 'the truth', it must also present an image of reality accepted by a particular age to fulfil its purpose. If values and beliefs reflect the social and historical constructs of the times, and assumptions about what is true change in accordance with the social, cultural, political and economic conditions of the time, then verisimilitude must also be subject to the same dynamic. Ramsden (2011) argues that verisimilitude 'is necessary, not only in translating the world into a fictional work...but equally in the representation of the real in factual works' (345). As Hayden White (1978, 1984 & 2005) has argued, factual histories require significant imagination in their construction – which, by necessity, involves the use of rhetorical forms. The truth that I seek through the writing process is subject to the cultural rules of representation of this current moment. Can the fusion of the factual and the fictional produce the effect of truth, a kind of facsimile of the truth? When does fiction become truth and truth become fiction? These are central questions in my endeavour, in my search for a plausible account that fills in the gaps of an incomplete family history.

I set out to explore 'truth' and 'verisimilitude' at their points of intersection – to see how fiction might lead me closer not only to the truth but also to situations where what is believed to be the truth might be considered a fiction. The theoretical discussions that pepper this thesis provide multiple lenses for analysing the themes that the narratives explore, so that theory and practice merge in the dialectical pursuit of a story that I hope rings true and replicates the aesthetic of truth of this cultural moment in time and place. In blurring the boundaries between what is known to be true and imagining what else might be true I have tried to honour the *pacte autobiographique* – by making my process as honest and transparent as possible. I have striven to create the effect of truth in an account that satisfies the psychological/emotional desire of the author, and the reader, to fill in the gaps and arrive at some kind of resolution. I have constructed one interpretation that I hope might in some way contribute to other accounts. It is easy to say that one strives for greater transparency through reflexivity, but it is rather more difficult to achieve it. As Maton (2003) cautions, there are many pitfalls in the process, and few are able to

achieve the kind of reflexive transparency that Bourdieu's 'signature obsession with reflexivity' (Waquant 1992:36) posited as essential to the representation of the truth.

Reflexivity in life writing

Each time the past is revisited in this thesis the story is reframed and rewritten in the context of the present. We return with a different lens, a different set of experiences, to interrogate a moment in the past that might illuminate understanding. As Ferguson (2009) suggests, 'there is no experience of the past. Memory is always a present experience; it is here and now' (109). The past only ever makes sense in the context of how it creates the present. Stories of the past are recounted from the standpoint of the present, which is informed by preconceived cultural, political, social, linguistic and ideological paradigms that shape the episteme of the times and hence the practice of the writer. Identifying and naming those assumptions is extremely difficult, as they function in a complex matrix of relationships. The standpoints of class, gender, ethnicity and culture, for example, inform individual subjectivities in unseen and subtle ways. It is not enough to simply attach theoretical labels to one's own standpoint. Maton asks: 'At what point are one's unintended, tacit assumptions sufficiently reduced and knowledge claims sufficiently bolstered by reflexivity?' (2003:59).

There is a risk involved in acknowledging the limits of rationality, in declaring that 'knowledge cannot be separated from the knower' (Alvesson & Skoldberg 2000:1). The reflexive identification of the writer's subjectivities could paradoxically have the effect of undermining the plausibility of the account. By creating an open and critical space where multiple opinions and perspectives can be challenged and interrogated I seek a 'reasoned analysis' of the subject matter through a dialogical process. Reflexivity might enable such dialogue, but it does raise the question: who are the participants in this conversation?

While Bakhtin's work has been used to theorise intertextuality, that is, the interaction of the text with other texts, the 'I-thou'¹⁷ relationship of the writer and the reader is not clearly explicated (Shepherd 1989:91) – nor is the 'field of cultural production' (Bourdieu 1993), where unseen dominant discourses (ideologies) are

¹⁷ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958:26).

interpreted as normal and natural perspectives. The multiple perspectives that inform intertextuality in this thesis respond to a range of theoretical positions, while also interacting directly with both the stories that are told and the people who might read them.

One of the challenges in theorising life writing is the enormous diversity of texts that fit under its broad canopy. As Gundmundsdóttir (2003) suggests, autobiography is a hybrid genre that is continually evolving and will continue to do so ‘as people’s ideas about the self, about narrative, and about history continue to change’ (185). I have entered that discourse and the open space it has created with the intention of honouring the ethical requirements of the life writing genre (Lejeune 1975; Eakin 2004; Douglas 2012), mindful that the subjectivities that inform my practice leave me open to the view that ‘Narcissus has become the mirror itself’ (Sprinker 1983:153). The subjectivities inherent in being so closely connected to the protagonists of this story requires that my interest in the role of the author should not merely be theoretical, but also serve to inform the dialectical development of authentic fictions.

Fiction has the potential to take us to a particular moment in time in a visceral sense – sights, sounds, smells, tastes and sensations that the body experiences – to enter into the consciousness of the characters and to imagine what their world might have been like by connecting their experience with our own (Cohn 1976). The representation is not, necessarily, historically factual. My fictional representations might allegorise how human beings respond to the times or a particular event, but they cannot be verified as an actual account of what that person felt or experienced.

Some of the pleasures of being immersed in the fictional world may be disrupted by the theoretical analytical process that I have adopted, but, like Pirandello’s invading characters, I hope those disruptions will enrich the story. Faced with the ethical dilemmas of my process I concluded that the ‘truth value’ that is assumed in life writing (Eakin 2004) would be better realised by problematising the process and employing multiple perspectives to shape my interpretation. As Ramsden (2011) argues: ‘The reader’s expectations and judgments will be dictated largely by the episteme of the age and the literary conventions of the time – the way that factual or fictional works are felt to relate to the empirical world’ (347). The dialogue between writer and reader that takes place between the lines will invariably reflect

that episteme. The case for reflexivity continues to be established, with social researchers and historians becoming more interested in the rhetorical form of the text (Alvesson & Skolberg 2009). These debates have informed my own attempt at reflexivity and hence the structure of this thesis.

Structures

White's thesis in *The Content of the Form* (1987) – that the author actively controls the meaning of the text in and between the lines, through rhetorical device and metaphor and through careful ordering and structuring of the content – is helpful in describing the structure of this thesis. I have tried to make the content of the form transparent and dialogical. The reflexive chapters wrestle with the slipperiness of truth and authenticity in the construction of a life narrative, exposing the author's subjectivities. The theoretical reflections and analysis interweave stories that capture significant episodes in my mother's early life and our shared life. Multiple perspectives are imbricated to produce critical insights and meaning in both the stories and the theoretical analysis. To follow on from White's analysis, the structure reflects the content of the thesis, just as the content of the thesis is shaped by the structure.

My personal investment in this narrative is immense, so the reflexive discussions serve to augment and authenticate the subjectivity of life writing through a range of perspectives. I explore notions of identity and the changing nature of the many selves that we are in the course of life. The impact of sepia-toned images on my imagination is explored in a third reflexive chapter that investigates the complexities of using the visual lens, images as texts, as a form of evidence. Historical research provides another form of evidence that can both verify my parents' accounts and fill out some of their omissions. The historical method provides further scope for problematising notions of truth. The fifth reflexive chapter explores the concept of place, as a concrete marker in the real world; an embodied experience that allows me to 'truthfully' say I was there, 'I saw it with my own eyes' (Zable 2002:134). Each provides a frame for thinking more deeply about the stories and the elements that are imbricated to tell the story. In the final reflexive chapter, I return to the questions posed in this introduction and interrogate the complexities of the psyche.

These multiple perspectives produce, I hope, a 'thicker' interpretation that pays tribute to family memory with compassion and understanding (Margalit 2002).

The show must go on

In raising the curtain on the complexities of the life writing process I have revealed my own vulnerabilities as author, and subject, in this story, and foreshadowed the strategy I have adopted in trying to address those dilemmas. Here, on the edge of the stage, under a very large spotlight, and before my unknown audience I want to say to my mother and grandmother: 'Come, put your arms through mine, and let me show you what I have done with our stories.'

4. Guilt

Moe, June 1961

It's Sunday Morning. I wake to the quietness of the house. It's always like this on Sunday mornings: quiet, still, a day of rest. I draw the covers up around my head, dreading the day ahead. I try to remember how it felt to be free of suffering, to have a soul that is luminously white. I stir restlessly in my bed. It is my day of reckoning. I must confront the evil that has possessed my body.

Sunday is a special day, a day of prayer. First there is no breakfast and then there is Mass. The empty hollow in my stomach reminds me of the black stain that is present in my usually chaste soul. The Body of Christ cannot enter this tainted tabernacle. It must be cleansed before it can be pure again.

I had pleaded with my mother to let me walk to church and attend Saturday night Confession, but it was too late and too dark. My father had been at the local pub, catching up with friends, and so couldn't drive me. The only Saturday when I had a real sin to confess became the darkest night of my life. I had barely slept.

I jump out of bed and head down the hallway to the next room. My parents are still asleep. My mother is resting her head inside my father's arm, as she always does. I stir her gently.

'We have to go to Mass,' I whisper in her ear.

She wakes with a start, the sleep still shrouding her eyes.

'Ah, yes,' she murmurs. 'We'll let your father sleep today.'

My father's eyes open briefly and then close again.

I dress in the green woollen suit my mother has just finished making, and slip on the white socks and black patent leather shoes that are to be worn only on Sunday's.

We set off on the long walk to church. I love my new suit and have been waiting impatiently for the last stitches to be finished. But now, instead of feeling excitement at wearing something new for my weekly communion with Jesus, the fluffy white collar is irritating the bottom of my ears and my feet feel like I am dragging invisible lead weights. Fear is feeding the alien presence in my being

'Why are you so quiet?' my mother asks.

'I... I...' the words won't come. 'I can't go to Communion.'

‘Why not? What terrible sin have you committed?’

This is my moment. I have to tell her.

‘I stole money from your purse when I went shopping for you.’

She doesn't say anything for a while but her heels seem to make a different sound on the pavement: more hollow, less rhythmical. I am waiting for her disappointment, her words of punishment.

‘What did you spend the money on?’

‘A small bottle of coke,’ I confess. ‘I just wanted to try it.’

‘What was it like?’ she asks.

‘Alright,’ I lie.

The truth is that I hadn't enjoyed its fizzy sweetness, but had forced myself to finish it, to the last drop, to justify the crime. It made me feel quite sick.

My mother starts laughing. I don't understand. I have committed a mortal sin and she is laughing.

‘It's alright, darling,’ she comforts me. ‘It's not stealing when you take from your mother's purse.’

‘But it's a mortal sin to steal,’ I argue. ‘I can't go to Communion with such a sin.’

‘It's alright. You have confessed to me and I forgive you. It's good that you told me. You can go to Communion.’

She bends down, kisses me and pats me on the head. The stain on my soul flutters restlessly. It wants to believe her sweet absolution.

Our feet click in time on the pavement.

5. Shade of Jew

Moe, April 1962

‘Why do you always buy me yellow jumpers?’

‘It’s not yellow. It’s a light tan. I think it will look good on you.’

‘You know I hate this colour.’

‘It’s a nice colour. And the wool is fine, so you can wear it under your suit.’

I can tell that Mum is upset because she is patting and stroking the tablecloth as if it’s a cat. I was with her when she bought the jumper so I know how pleased she was to have found something nice that she could afford to buy my father for his birthday.

Dad never bought himself clothes, and mostly just wore his work clothes. He only had one good suit and few casual clothes that he wore on the weekend.

Mum has made Dad’s favourite goulash with boiled potatoes for our dinner, with custard and stewed apples for desert. My brothers and I had planned to sing Happy Birthday after he opened his present, but now we are sitting quietly – waiting. Peter is twisting the end of the plastic bag that the jumper came in, and Henry is tapping his fingers on the table. Everyone is looking at the jumper, which seems to be glowing like a beacon on the table.

‘I won’t wear it.’

‘Don’t be silly. It’s a good quality jumper.’

I pick up the jumper and rub it against my cheek. I can feel the fibres tickling my skin. It doesn’t look really yellow to me, more like the mustard that Dad likes to put on his sausage.

Dad takes the jumper from me and holds it up.

‘You’re in love with these Jewish colours. You always buy me Jewish jumpers.’

‘Stop it, you’re being silly now,’ Mum’s voice is a bit shaky like it gets if she is about to cry. ‘Just leave it, I’ll take it back.’

This conversation is happening in Polish and the word for Jew, *żyd* (zhid), sounds much more insulting in Polish than it does in English. In Polish the word is short and sharp starting, with a hissing sound that ends with a sharp d, as if it has been spat out. My father says the word *żydowski* (Jewish) with an even stronger hiss on the *żyd* part.

I don't know why this mustard colour is Jewish. I have never met anyone who is Jewish so I don't know what they wear. I don't even know what a Jew is. I have heard my parents and their friends talk about *żydzi* as if they are not very good people. Once I heard Mr. Rogowski say that a man at work was a *żydek* (little Jew) but was pretending he wasn't.

My father pushes aside his empty desert bowl and lays the 'yellow' garment out in front of him.

'It is good quality,' he concedes, running his hand over the body of the garment. 'And it is nice and light, but I don't like this yellow. I'd prefer it in a navy or green. And I want something I can wear by itself, not just under the suit.'

Mum takes the jumper from my father's hands, folds it carefully and slides it back into the bag.

'I'll take it back and get a refund, and you can choose your own jumper,' she replies, a little more calmly.

'Why don't we have a game of gin rummy?' suggests Peter.

'Good idea,' says Henry, jumping up from his seat.

6. Confession

Moe, September 1981

I don't remember exactly when my mother told me the truth about her family. I've been trying to piece it together through a process of elimination and deduction: My father was still alive and I had already been teaching for a year or more; I was spending a few days with them over one of the school breaks – so it must have been some time during 1981. I had been reading about one of the death camps in Poland, a place called Treblinka, where many Jewish people had died. I walked into the kitchen, where dinner was about to be served, numbed by the horror of the camps.

'Have you been crying?' my mother asks.

'It's just the book I'm reading. It's very upsetting.'

'What's it about?'

'It's about a concentration camp where Jewish people were sent. It's very disturbing.'

'Why are you reading about that?' my father interrupts. 'What do you want to know that for? They were terrible times.'

'I think it's important to know what happened. It's a shocking history. We never learned about this when I studied History at school.'

'Nobody wants to remember that. It's better not to think about it,' my mother says dismissively.

'But this is an appalling history. Did you know they were killing Jews like this?'

Silence.

'Did you know about these camps? They weren't for prisoners of war like the one Dad was in, they were... death camps.'

'We didn't know, nobody knew.' The words seem to be catching in her throat. 'Not until after the war.'

My father lights a cigarette and draws in heavily. His mouth is shut tight, so he blows the smoke through his nose. I continue.

'People let it happen. It says in here that the British Government had been told about the trains taking people to these camps. They could have stopped it. They didn't do anything.'

I can feel my anger rising at the injustice of it all, at my parents' wilful ignorance. Or was their anti-Semitism so strong that they could countenance such barbarity? On a number of occasions, as an educated adult, I had reflected on the 'Jewish' moments of my childhood, and come to the conclusion that my parents, and their friends, were essentially anti-Semitic.

'You should tell her,' my father says quietly. 'It's time for her to know.'

My mother looks first at me and then at my father. She sits down on the chair heavily and stares at her hands. She notices a crumb on the tablecloth and picks it up between her fingers. I barely hear the words that come out of her mouth.

'My mother was probably sent to a place like that. She was Jewish.'

'You were Jewish?'

'We were communists. My mother was a Party member. I never felt Jewish. My father wasn't Jewish. We had nothing to do with Jewish people... but they took her because she was Jewish.'

'Not because she was a Party official.'

'No,' she confirms, examining the crumb between her fingers.

I'm not sure what I should feel about this lie we have been told about my mother's life in Russia. I know that Jewish heritage is matriarchal and, according to Jewish law, that would mean I am Jewish as well.

'I did wonder about that, why they took her. Why you never heard from her again. Did you try to find out which work camp they sent her to?'

'How could I? Besides, I didn't want to know. I wanted to believe she survived, that she lived,' my mother says, her voice wavering.

'What are you scared of? Why couldn't you tell us?'

'I thought you would be upset with me.'

'I'm not upset with you,' I lie. 'I just don't understand why you never told us. It makes more sense now. We should know who our grandparents were.'

'How do you feel to know you are Jewish?' my mother asks.

'I don't really know. I don't know enough about Judaism. It's not a crime or anything. Why keep it a secret like that, from your family?'

'You never know what might happen. It could happen again. I didn't want you and the boys to be picked on for being Jewish. I didn't even know anything about being Jewish. We were communists.'

My mind flashes back to the time Henry came home from school one day upset that the boys had teased him for having a 'Jewish nose'. That had been one of the occasions when the interaction between my mother and father led me to believe they were anti-Semitic.

'Ah yes', my father had teased. 'Henry takes after his mother's side of the family.'

'Don't be silly. Stop it,' my mother had said, in the voice she reserves for rebuking my father. 'There's no such thing as a Jewish nose.'

I had made nothing of it because Henry did look more like our mother, while Peter and I had more of our father's features.

It is hard to be upset with her. I can see that she is very agitated at having to make this admission. I am not sure how I feel about it myself. Do I want to be Jewish? I am still trying to extricate myself from the guilt of Catholicism and am not really interested in practicing any religion. I don't know what it means to be Jewish if one isn't religious. I don't really understand the origins of anti-Semitism, but I have learned about its consequences.

I feel some sympathy for her position. I knew, from the many conversations I had listened to over the years, that the Latrobe Valley Poles harboured all sorts of secrets about their past lives. The silences, whispers, nudges, raised eyebrows and nuanced tones contained a language for which I was unable to crack the code.

'I don't want you to tell your brothers. They don't need to know. What does it matter?' My mother's face is pale.

'They should know too,' my father comforts her, gently patting her hand.

'What difference will it make? They might be mad at me too.'

'They won't be mad at you. It explains a whole lot of things,' I reply. 'They should know the truth.'

My mother is not convinced.

'You don't know what it was like. Just after Mama was taken I was standing in the queue waiting to get our ration of bread and I heard people shouting: "Kill the Jews and save the Russians." I was very scared. I'll never forget that. I didn't want to be a Jew. I didn't want my children to be Jews. You never know what might happen. It could come again...'

'It was Russian people saying this?' I interrupt.

‘Yes, the Russians, my people, were shouting “Kill the Jews” and shaking their fists.’

My father pats my mother’s hand again.

‘It won’t happen again, not in Australia. This is a free country. They would never let something like that happen here.’ He wipes the corner of his eyes with his hand.

‘Enough,’ my mother says firmly. ‘Let’s have our meal. Everything will be cold.’

The subject is closed. I don’t dare ask another question for fear I might upset her further.

My mother stands up from her chair, moves to the stove and lifts the lid off the pot. Clouds of steam spill into the kitchen, filling it with the pungent odour of cooked beetroot and cabbage.

7. Faith

Moe, January 2012

My mother's spiritual life has always been something of a puzzle to me. Her conversion to Catholicism was part of her transformation from being a Russian communist, a devotee of Lenin, to a Polish Catholic, a child of Christ. By marrying Christ she could marry my father, and take her place in the Polish community.

Her loyalty to the church mirrored her devotion to her duties as housewife and mother. She ensured that all three of her children attended Catholic primary schools and fulfilled the obligatory rites of passage of Confession, Communion and Confirmation, even though she had not herself been raised in this manner. Both my brothers served their time as altar boys, while I adopted the mantle of good Catholic girl with passion and enthusiasm.

Her first experience of religion was in Germany, where she would sit on the bench outside and watch the people as they came in and out of the church.

'I liked to look at what they were wearing. It was the only place you could see nice things, because there was nothing in the shops by then,' she told me.

In the early years of my renunciation I railed against the hypocrisy of pretending to still be a good Catholic girl in order to keep up appearances in the Polish community. I had lost my faith. If I did relent and attend Mass, I would slouch irreverently on the uncomfortable bench seats and whisper smart asides about the content of the sermons, stifling guffaws, and embarrassing my mother so much that she almost preferred me not to come. My loss of faith had been a source of tension between us, along with my eschewing of the domestic role of women.

I always understood that her desire to have me attend Polish Mass had little to do with saving my soul.

'What will people think?' was her mantra throughout my childhood. The eyes of the community were more daunting than the wrath of God.

Thirty years after my father's death, my mother wants to mark the anniversary of his passing with a Mass said in Polish. I wonder if it will help his soul to have a few

prayers said for him at this late stage, even if he were a true believer, but I have agreed to go with her.

Despite her perpetual fear of falling, my mother genuflects before the large cross that hangs above the altar and makes the sign of the cross from forehead to chest. I stand behind her unwilling to follow suit, and yet still feeling a little uneasy about the irreverence of not bowing my head and knees when entering the house of God. The little girl, who often had to make up sins each week so she could receive absolution from the priest hiding behind a purple curtain, blushes before the hanging Jesus. His hands and feet are pinned with nails, blood dripping down his side from the lance that was thrust into his abdomen less than 2000 years ago. As a child I had always felt desperately sorry for his suffering on the road to Calvary.

In one of our last conversations, Henry told me that following my father's funeral he had lost his cool with the Polish priest's proprietorial claim over our father's soul.

'I told him to fuck off with his bullshit. I said Dad didn't believe in the Church. He used to tell us that the people in his village gave money to the priests and went hungry themselves. The priests never went hungry. They had everything.'

It was true that my father said such things, and that his actions were not those of someone who was deeply religious, even though he was a Catholic from birth and my mother the late convert. He only ever went to Polish Mass to see friends. He would wear a suit and tie, and was even known to go to Communion though never to Confession. Nevertheless, I knew he wouldn't have liked his son to swear at the priest.

As I look around the church I feel a twinge of sadness for the congregation. A once robust community of fervent Catholics, with more than 200 families, has been reduced to a small group of ailing elderly people clinging to their walking frames and sticks. There are probably only 30 or 40 people here.

When the organ strikes up a resonant Yuletide hymn, I recognise the song immediately; as children we sang the chorus proclaiming the arrival of the young Jesus, and the church would tremble.

I am transported back into Polish prayer. I am reminded of the greatness of God, the forgiveness of the Lord, his infinite wisdom and my great flaws.

'Moja wina, moja wina, moja bardzo wielka wina.'

My fault, my fault, my very great fault.

The priest and the congregation beat their chests and intone their guilt. They are not worthy. We are not worthy. And so the grace of God is exalted.

Communion time comes and my mother doesn't even ask me if I will go up with her.

I kneel, I stand, I sit, and kneel and stand whenever required, without guffaws or snide remarks, and then the service is over.

On our way home I ask my mother if the rules have changed about going to Communion without having been to Confession. She doesn't answer me.

'I was just wondering... you haven't been able to go to church or Confession lately.'

'Well, I don't drive anymore,' she says a little defensively. 'What sort of sins do I commit anyway? Nobody knows if I went to Confession.'

I could say, 'God does', but I don't.

'I don't know,' she says, eyes focused on the road ahead. 'I don't know what I think about all that anymore.'

8. Language and Culture: Which Self to Wear Today?

I realise myself initially through others; from them I receive words, forms, and tonalities for the formation of my initial idea of myself. [...] Just as the body is formed initially in the mother's womb (body), a person's consciousness awakens wrapped in another consciousness.

(Bakhtin 1986:138)

I am always surprised when my mother contradicts an image I have of her. Although I knew that her faith had been tested both by my father's death and then my brother's, I have assumed that she continues to draw comfort from her religious practice; she still believes in prayer and God, or at least fears divine retribution should she fall by the wayside. Perhaps she's not subject to the same lingering guilt and fear that was seared into my childhood psyche. Bakhtin (1986) suggests that the initial idea of the self is formed in relation to others, and awakens 'wrapped in another consciousness' (138) – that of the mother. Do her Soviet origins immune her from the residual guilt that institutional Catholicism has instilled in me? Perhaps it is because she was not indoctrinated in the same way that I was with a Catholic education, where the sacrifice of Jesus was our burden to bear. Then again, she believed Lenin was God and socialism was the highest moral order; a doctrine that also required significant faith. It took many years to shake off the subliminal triggers for experiencing Catholic guilt, and I'm still not sure I have completely. I wonder how long it took for her to shake off the inculcation of her Soviet upbringing.

I understand that individual identities are provisional and subject to alter over time, and that those changes can be so transformative as to completely change a person. These changing selves can also coexist as a hybridised self, nestling within each other like the layers of an onion. I still yearn for the blissful purity I experienced on my first Communion day when my soul matched the pure white dress and veil that I wore in anticipation of receiving the Body of Christ. This child-self feels a little betrayed by my mother's duplicity. Did she deliberately withhold her scepticism, unlike my father's dismissive critiques, so that I would fit into the world we inhabited, or was I just naïve and gullible? Was the moral order that appeared to be set in stone merely a chimera constructed to subjugate me, to make me good, or did she really believe at the time? Has she undergone yet another spiritual transformation late in life as a practical response to her diminished physical

mobility? The answer to this particular question is unknowable as I doubt she knows the answer herself anymore as to whether she was a true believer at some point or not.

The idea of transitions and changes in identity is a recurring theme in this thesis and has required an understanding of the evolution of the many selves we evolve into throughout life. The truth-value of the text relies on discernment of these changes. I want to foreshadow some of the issues around identity that have informed the stories I have told to further problematise the slippery nature of truth in this thesis.

Defining the self

The concept of identity is central to the life writing process, both in relation to the self-concept embedded in the subjectivities of the writer and in the representations of the subjects of the narrative. Eakin (2008) suggests that many forms of life writing are explicitly about identity formation and exploration, and that we learn to construct our autobiographical selves from a very early age. 'Autobiographical discourse', he argues, 'plays a decisive part in the regime of social accountability that governs our lives' (Eakin 2005:3). Describing who we are, and how we have evolved and changed, is a process that continues throughout life. We rewrite our lives with each account (Smith and Watson 2010:60-65).

In *Self Identity in Everyday Life* Ferguson (2009) elaborates on his deceptively simple definition of the concept of identity – 'that which makes, or is thought to make something just what it is' (10) – by providing a historical overview of the changing discourses around the concept of identity, from the early sociological definitions that sought to explain the presentation of self in everyday life (Berger & Luckman 1967, Goffman 1959) to the more elaborate discussions on identity in recent years, particularly in relation to gender identities (Butler 2005, Jelenik 1989). He also refers to the fluid nature of self-representation in life writing, particularly autobiography, and cites Gilmore (2001) and Eakin (2008) as examples, noting the contribution such approaches have made to sociological ways of thinking about identity. Ferguson (2009) ends where he began, at the beginning, for he concludes that 'the liveliness of life continually demands another beginning' (194). The selves

that we become are forever beginning, and are continually re-imagined, in relation to others and in time and place.

In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur (1992) makes an important distinction between the identity of *sameness* and the identity of *self hood*, which he posits as being in dialectical relation to each other. The former relates to a notion of permanence or the 'uninterrupted continuity between the first and the last stage in the development of what we consider to be the same individual' (117), while the latter has a more temporal meaning and relates to the changing individual view of the self. The two intersect and are reconciled through narrative identity that is revealed via character and plot (146-147). Ricoeur poses a series of 'who' questions at the outset that must be considered in relation to the character. He asks 'who' is speaking, 'who' has authority or 'who' is acting, and 'who' are we evaluating in terms of morality or character (1-25). A response to the question 'who are you?' is entirely dependent on the specific context in which the question is asked, and invariably changes over time. The standpoint of a given 'I' evolves in the course of living and in relationship to the other, the person who is asking the question, according to 'the physical and social constraints of our lives in human culture' (Eakin 2008:xi) or the 'dominant discourses of power' (Bourdieu 1993:27).

The self is therefore never fully formed. For Bakhtin (1986), the self is always considered in relation to the other, as the opening quote to this chapter suggests: 'I realise myself initially through others' (138). The child is initially an extension of the parent, particularly the mother in an interactive relationship that is then extended to the world, suggesting an inherited sense of self, of direct attachment to another in a cultural sense.

An exploration of the concept of identity as inheritance takes us to the intersection of sociological, biological, psychological, linguistic and philosophical perspectives on the nature of self-identity. While it is beyond the scope of this analysis to explore the full breadth of these discussions on identity and self hood, these complex notions of identity underpin this discussion. A life narrative must take into account the fluid nature of selfhood.

My mother's values, for example, have changed significantly over time, as has her sense of self. The mother she was in the 1960s and 70s is not the mother she was in 1980s or 90s. The changing values of contemporary society, including feminist

perspectives, have had an impact, largely because I embraced feminist principles and challenged the traditional role for women in the Polish Diaspora of the Latrobe Valley. My mother had, ironically, adopted the traditional role that her own mother had forgone and which had been criticised by her mother, my great grandmother. Unlike Elisaveta's mother, however, my mother engaged with the debates that I initiated, and is now far more open minded and accepting of difference than she was when I was a child. McNay (1999) observes that within late capitalist society subject positions are more fluid; masculine and feminine identities, for example, 'are not unified configurations but a series of uneasily sutured, potentially conflicted subject positions' (108), so multiple subjectivities can be operating at the same time. The evolution of selfhood is pertinent to this life narrative.

I am particularly interested in the transitioning self and the multiple subject positions that emerge and evolve in relation to the dominant discourses of the times. Of the many complex elements that contribute to those shifting positions, I want to focus on how language and cultural practices interact in the shaping of identities, to elucidate some of the transitions and transformations in identity that are enacted in the life of a migrant and their offspring. The dialectical relationship between language and culture is complex in the self that transitions from one place and group of social relations to another, from one language and culture to another.

The language and culture of the family

As Bakhtin suggests at the outset, identity formation and development rests in the child's first relationship, that is, with their parents. The language and culture of the parents is seamlessly transmitted in these early interactions, initially through the mother's womb and then through the 'consciousness of the other' (Bakhtin 1986:138) in the course of daily life. In my family, two languages and two cultures were transmitted – though only one was explicitly named while the other was experienced as absence.

In 1942 my mother was a month shy of 17 when she left her home, in Rostov-na-Donu in Southern Russia, to go to Germany as 'forced labour' (Herbert 1997). She had almost finished high school and wanted to study chemistry at university. Russian language and culture informed her world view, but she had also studied German language at school. My father Paul, on the other hand, came from an impoverished

peasant background in a small village called Markopol, in the contested land between Poland and Ukraine. He was ethnically Polish, but also spoke Ukrainian. He never learned to read or write either language as he was forced to leave school at age nine, when his father died from pneumonia. Despite his illiteracy, he learned to speak German while living in the country first as a POW and then as a forced labourer.

My mother came from a relatively privileged background in the context of the times in the USSR. Her mother Elisaveta was a judge in Stalin's court of law and a member of the Communist Party. Elisaveta grew up in a shtetl, a small Jewish town or village in Eastern Europe, where Yiddish would have been her primary language and Russian the language of transaction. She sublimated her Jewish heritage when she became a communist, and was estranged from her family when she married a second time to a Polish man who was not Jewish. Although my mother's biological father was Jewish she has no memory of living with him, and little memory of her mother's family whom she did not see very often. My mother says that although she was not brought up with any Jewish cultural practices, and did not identify herself as Jewish, she understood that it was her mother's background and hence inherently part of hers. She was brought up as a communist, a young pioneer¹⁸ inculcated with the ideology of the time and place she found herself. Russian citizens were required to record their ethnicity under 'nationality' on their identity papers, and so Elisaveta and Lena must have had Jewish as their nationality irrespective of their allegiance to the Communist Party.

When she met Paul¹⁹ in Germany Lena had been away from her home for a year, and had kept her Jewish identity a secret; she had papers with Pavel Bogdanovich, her stepfather, listed as her biological father, with no mention of her Jewish nationality. Lena would most certainly have been sent to a concentration camp had she been discovered. The only person my mother ever told that she was Jewish was my father – until the day she told me when I was twenty-nine years of age. I want to understand how that secret impacted on her identity in terms of feelings of 'selfhood' in her adopted community, and her sense of 'sameness' as a young

¹⁸ Young Pioneers – mass youth organisation of the USSR for children aged 10-15 in the Soviet Union from 1922-1991.

¹⁹ The name Paul is 'Pavel' in Polish and Russian – but I am using the English version of my father's name to avoid confusion with my mother's stepfather, Pavel Bogdanovich.

woman who has lost contact with her family and country of origin. It has occurred to me that she may not feel a strong connection to the Lena who lived in Russia as a result of this cover up.

The journey my mother took from Russia to Germany, and then to Australia, involved a complete transformation of her identity from Russian Communist to Polish Catholic. As forced labour during the war she had to develop her skills in the German language. At war's end she was housed in Displaced Persons (DP) camps in Germany with my father, where they lived with Polish people. She taught herself to read and write Polish and converted to Roman Catholicism. She became a mother in 1947, when her first child, Peter, was born in the DP camp in Windflecken. Paul, Lena and Peter came to Australia in 1950 with a large group of Polish migrants, most of who settled in the Latrobe Valley. My mother tried to blend into that community as a Polish Catholic, her past life in Russia no doubt sublimated by the experiences of the previous eight years in exile.

My first language at home was Polish and I have no memory of how my transition to English speaker occurred. I was brought up as a Polish Catholic girl, went to Polish Saturday school and participated in the cultural activities of the Polish Catholic community in the Latrobe Valley. I wore the national costumes of different regions in Poland: embroidered shirts, floral skirts and aprons trimmed with ribbons and lace. These experiences were formative in shaping my identity as Polish-Australian. I had no connection to my Russian or Jewish heritage. My mother's Jewish identity was the invisible elephant in our cosy family kitchen. A motivating factor in this project is to restore lost heritage, and connect with the rich Russian traditions that formed my mother and grandmother. As author and subject there is therefore a double voiced²⁰ subjectivity in this narrative; I am both the patient on the table and the interlocutor. What impact has this silence and denial, trauma and displacement, had on the children of Lena and Paul? How might the formative language and culture of my mother have enriched my identity had she been more willing and able to share them with me? What can be reclaimed from the past, and is there value in doing so? If I weave a cloak with Russian and Jewish thread, recite the verse of

²⁰ Double voicedness is a concept devised by Bakhtin to indicate that the author's voice is always present in the characters s/he creates. Here it also acts as a reflexive symbol of the inherent subjectivity of the dual role as author and subject.

Russia's literary greats, learn to dance the Cossack, and immerse myself in the work of ancient Jewish scholars and the cultural activities of the Jewish Diaspora, will it help me to understand absence and fill in the gaps the past has created? Will it help to understand what was lost?

Reclaiming absence

Reclaiming a culture is not a simple process. I don't know what it is like to 'feel' legitimately Russian or Jewish. I have not belonged to a Russian or Jewish community throughout the formative years of childhood. I have not been shaped by the language, values, beliefs and practices of those communities. As Eakin (2008) and others have suggested, narrative is an essential part of who we are as physical, social and cultural beings, and the construction of identity that occurs through life writing can help to anchor our shifting identities in time. I have never told the story of this missing past. Could the process of writing it make me feel more Russian or Jewish?

I have sought to learn more about Jewish culture both through research and immersion in the Jewish Diaspora in Melbourne. I have attended Jewish festivals, weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, circumcision ceremonies, funerals and Passover celebrations as a result of my relationship with my partner, David Bilander, who grew up in the Jewish Diaspora of Melbourne.

Midway through this project I joined a Russian language class, which required me to learn Cyrillic script and the complex grammar system of the Russian language. I experienced the difference between Polish and Russian language and culture, which helped me to better understand the transitions my mother might have experienced in her journey from Russian Jewish Communist to Polish Catholic Australian. I wanted to understand how those transitions might have impacted on her attitude towards her mother and her childhood home.

According to Jewish law, Halakha, I am Jewish – due to the matriarchal line between Elisaveta, Lena and myself. For the non-religious, non-practising, ex-Catholic that I claim to be, this presents a conundrum in terms of adopting this identity. I can claim the identity of a Jewish person, but whether I can ever 'legitimately' *feel* Jewish is a much more complex issue in terms of the dialectical relationship between sameness and selfhood that Ricoeur (1992) poses. I can accept

that the same self that was once a legitimate (baptised) practising Polish Catholic might also legitimately be Jewish, but this is not the same as having the selfhood of being Jewish, as belonging to that people. The issue is further complicated by the many variations of Jewish religious practice and the ethnic identifications of secular Jews who, although they might celebrate religious festivals as cultural practices, do not adhere to religious law. Similarly, to eliminate all influences of one's Catholic inheritance is also complex, as the widely quoted cliché 'Once a Catholic, always a Catholic' suggests.

The concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990), which refers to socially acquired embodied systems of propensities and predispositions that are subtly inculcated by the powerful institutions of society, provides a framework for thinking about cultural practices. These 'deep structural' socially acquired propensities and predispositions, which are manifested in outlooks, opinions, beliefs, values, and aesthetic appreciation – ways of thinking, speaking, responding and behaving – are not necessarily consciously realised.

It is because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know. The habitus is the universalizing mediation which causes an individualizing mediation which causes an individual agent's practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less "sensible" and "reasonable".

(Bourdieu 1990:79)

Habitus is realised in the '*le Sens pratique*' (feel for the game) at a pre-reflexive level of practical mastery like learning the specifics of individual dance moves which are then executed fluidly and seamlessly as required. The habitus explains the 'common sense' or 'natural' behaviours that are embodied as 'normal' behaviour.

Identity is therefore the product of a long process of enculturation by the social and cultural institutions to which one is exposed – the family, the school, peer groups, the church, the sporting club, literature circle, geographic locality and so on (Berger & Luckman 1967, Goffman 1959).²¹ Bourdieu does not regard habitus as a fixed and unchangeable response, however, as these categories are fluid and temporal in nature, responding to generational changes in attitudes, beliefs, ways of

²¹ In the anthology *Nobody Passes*, Bernstein Sycamore (2006) sets out to challenge the very notion of belonging to any group – gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ability, body type, ethnicity, health status, ethnicity, political group, education institution, fashion cult and the systems of power that 'pass' or 'fail' people in or out of any grouping. Identity by such accounts is extremely fluid.

being and doing. Accordingly, social subjects have agency, the capacity for reflexivity and the ability to acquire new skills and dispositions throughout their lives. McNay (1999) warns that such reflexivity is not necessarily a simple process, for 'habitus suggests a layer of embodied experience that is not immediately amenable to self fashioning' (102). Yet, my mother *became* Polish and has lived as one in the Polish community for more than 60 years. Nevertheless, she acknowledges her hybrid self as a Russian, Polish Australian, and, in some circles now, Jewish.

Jewish identity

What would it mean for me to embrace Jewish identity? How might one acquire the habitus of the Jewish people – an identity that generally develops throughout life? As an ethno-religious community, the Jewish people are not a homogenous group; many are not religious at all, while others are very orthodox in their practices. A complex diversity of religious and social practices, beliefs and dispositions, make up the Jewish community, which has essentially been united by a history of marginalisation and persecution within mainstream society. The history of the Jews, and their place in the world, is the subject of much contested study and discussion.²² The question which most intrigued me at the outset of this project was: What does it mean to be Jewish if one is not religious, if one has never even practiced the religion? What makes one Jewish?

I asked many non-religious Jewish people this question. Each response was different. Most had some knowledge of religious practices even if their family had not been religious – celebrations such as Shabbat, Passover, Chanukah, Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah were familiar cultural practices. Even amongst those practising the religion there is much diversity, and some are less strict in their adherence than others. All the people I spoke to found the question difficult to answer despite feeling a deep connection with their Jewish identity. In *The Finkler Question*, Jacobsen (2010) explores the concept of the 'self hating' Jew in an ironic and humorous depiction of Sam Finkler, an academic who belongs to a group, called ASHamed Jews, who deplore the activities of Israel. Jacobsen's portrayal of the Diaspora of Jews living in London illuminates the complexity of Jewish identity. A

²² Johnson (1987), Novick (2001), Brown and Berk (1977), and Jacobsen (2010), illustrate the diversity of these conversations.

shared history of identification contains many subtle elements that connect a people as one. One of Jacobsen's characters, Tyler, seems to capture the opaqueness of those complexities when she says: 'I think you've got to be one to get it' (120), in response to another character's bewilderment about elements of the Ashkenazi Jews argument. To 'get it' requires an embodied understanding of the history, culture and habitus of the Jewish people.

For a number of years I pursued the idea of framing my fictional stories within the Midrashic tradition, imagining that by enacting a traditional Jewish approach to storytelling I might feel more culturally Jewish. Midrash comes from the root word 'to search out' or to 'dig for meaning', and two distinct forms – Midrash Halakha and Midrash Aggadah – are employed. Halakhic writing deals with practical matters of religious law and behaviour, while Aggadah literally means 'telling' or 'story' and explores ethical ideas, biblical characters, or narrative moments. Midrash Aggadah is more open and does not have a standardised method of interpretation (Steinsaltz 1987:29).

A Jewish friend suggested the Aggadic approach as an appropriate form for filling in the gaps of my family stories. Clear exegetic principles that involve evidence and deductive reasoning inform this creative play with story. Steinsaltz presents thirty six different principles that scholars learn and adhere to in the process of studying the Torah. The principles inherent in the use of Midrash for clarification, illumination and insight, is of considerable interest in the life-writing process – particularly those elements related to the truth of incomplete stories. Midrashic scholars spend years of study absorbing the form through reading and discussion. Even though Aggadic Midrash is less rigid, and allows for humour and imagination, my residual Catholicism made me feel irreverent if I didn't strictly adhere to the principles and I eventually abandoned the idea. My limited studies did however provide insight into Jewish identity and humour, which often references Midrashic approaches.²³ It helped me to understand how intertwined and embedded history, culture and religious traditions are in Jewish identity.

The period of the European Enlightenment, from the final decades of the late 19th century to the early 20th Century, highlighted a growing shift in Jewish identity

²³ Isaac Bashevis Singer's (1957, 1961) delightful morality tales also provided real insights into the role of religious law in the social and cultural practices of everyday life in the shtetls of Poland and Russia.

from one driven by religious law towards one which identified more with the thinking of the times (Johnson 1987). The Haskalah, or the Jewish Enlightenment, caused a significant shift in Jewish thinking, where many of the rigid and strict laws of Jewish religious practice were challenged and interrogated. The Haskalah aimed to free the Jews from the 'errors of prejudice, superstition and magic' (Brown & Berk 1977:18). Jews were to be assimilated into the wider society in language, dress and manners, and study in secular schools, even on the Sabbath. Such emancipation would enable Jews to live freely and easily within the broader community (Johnson 1987:236-313). In Russia, many Jews embraced communism as the path to freedom and liberation, and were active in the people's movement. Many revolutionary leaders and Party members were Jewish, most notably Leon Trotsky.

My mother and grandmother's lives were inextricably linked with the maelstrom of change that was the Soviet experiment. Following on from Steedman's (1986) insights, the choices they made, and the things that happened to them were determined by the events of the times, their cultural dispositions, and ultimately their own individual personalities and psychologies. Communism offered emancipation for women – education, access to the arts, a professional working life, and a better standard of living (Halle 1933, Fitzpatrick 1978) – and opportunities that could never be realised through identification with the Jewish people in Russia at that time. Elisaveta freed herself from the poverty of the shtetl by claiming these opportunities. It is impossible to know how difficult that transition might have been. Jewish religious practices had been actively discouraged by both Lenin and Stalin, and values and beliefs had already changed during the period of the Jewish enlightenment. My mother has no memory of Jewish cultural practice and only remembers that she was raised as a Russian patriot and communist.

I wanted to understand how Elisaveta and her daughter's lives evolved in Rostov-na-Donu during those pre-war years. The historical work of Sheila Fitzpatrick (1978, 2000, 2008, and 2010) and Orlando Figes (1996, 2002, 2008) provided insights into a world the West has struggled to understand. Both scholars demonstrate a fondness for the language and culture of the Russian people, and an empathy with the struggles and hardships they have endured. In *Natasha's Dance*, Figes (2002) tries to find the essence of the Russian spirit through the products of their culture –

literature, art works, theatre, music and film – which he believes reveals the inner life of the nation, the enigmatic Russian soul.

The Russian novel as cultural practice

Russian history and literature have served to shape a view in the West that the former USSR was a country possessed of a culture very different to that of the Western world. The mutual distrust and suspicion between Western powers and the former Soviet Union – and the fear of the ‘communist peril’ – has served to create an aura of mystery and exoticism around my mother’s childhood home. The quixotic Russian spirit that Figes explores seems to live on beyond the borders even after years of exile. The cultural artefacts of the country instil pride and loyalty in all Russians – transcending political affiliations. My mother still proudly alludes to the richly literary Russian novels she read as a child; despite being in exile from her country for the greater part of her life, she is capable of expressing a strong spiritual allegiance to the literary traditions of her motherland – traditions that Figes (2002:xxvii) contends took the form of ‘huge poetic structures for symbolic contemplation’, rather than simply being novels in the European sense. The works, he argues, represent a nation trying to understand itself, a search for truth:

The overarching subject of all these works was Russia – its character, its history, its customs and conventions, its spiritual essence and its destiny. In a way that was extraordinary, if not unique to Russia, the country’s artistic energy was almost wholly given to the quest to grasp the idea of its nationality.

(Figes 2002: xxv)

Figes provides numerous examples to illustrate his thesis that the artistic traditions of the Russian people capture the unique qualities of what it means to be Russian – an identity that never leaves the person who was born on its soil. He recounts a story about a dinner party that he attended with composers Shostakovich and Stravinsky who had lived in exile from their ‘Fatherland’ for many years. Stravinsky is quoted as saying:

The smell of Russian earth is different, and such things are impossible to forget... A man has one birthplace, one fatherland, one country – he can have only one country – and the place of his birth is the most important factor in his life.

(Figes 2002: 586)

Identification with the 'fatherland' is a collective experience that incorporates the official discourses of the system with the lived experience of its people. In *Everyday Stalinism*, Sheila Fitzpatrick (2000) provides a vivid account of how people navigated daily life and 'tried to live normal lives in the extraordinary circumstances of Stalinism' (1). She describes a society where citizens kept their real identities secret and created public personas that enabled them to survive in a world that was in the throes of dramatic social, cultural and economic transformation. She writes: 'These were times of massive social dislocation, when millions of people changed their occupations and places of residence' (2). Fitzpatrick captures the process of destroying an old world and creating a new one; the new Communist Russia was much easier for young people to embrace than those who had lived in the old order. Everyday life was made more difficult by the shortage of housing and consumable goods – food, clothing, shoes, household items – that had almost completely disappeared from shops. The impact of these transformations on the cultural life of the society is difficult to comprehend.

Life and Fate by Vasily Grossman is often cited as a novel that captures a Russian's perspective on Soviet life during the nineteen-thirties and forties. 'Some critics even rate it more highly than Pasternaks' *Doctor Zhivago* or the novels of Solzhenitsyn' (Beevor,²⁴ in Grossman, 2005). Grossman was a staunch Soviet citizen, devoted to the cause of socialism, and believed that the hardships were a short-term and necessary element of the process of revolutionary change (Flanagan 2010). His idealism faded in the aftermath of World War II – where he had been a frontline journalist²⁵ – probably as a result of his mother's death at the hands of the *Einsatzgruppen*, for which he felt enormous remorse. Grossman was unable to publish *Life and Fate* in Russia, and had copies confiscated, due to the politically sensitive nature of his critique of the Communist regime and endemic anti-Semitism within the system. It would seem that verisimilitudinous fictional Russian novels at that time were viewed by the state as political commentary, and therefore censored or destroyed – as were the historical accounts of the time. Grossman's books (2005,

²⁴ Historian Andrew Beevor is the author of *Stalingrad* which provides a dramatic and absorbing account of the siege of Stalingrad in World War II. He draws heavily on the journalistic accounts of Grossman in this work. Tumarkin (2008) also quotes heavily from his work, as does Flanagan in his reflections on truth and freedom (2010).

²⁵ See Grossman, V. (2005). *A Writer at War*, edited and translated by Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova. London: Pimlico.

2006, and 2009 – all published posthumously and smuggled out of the country) are instructive in their depiction of the inner workings of a ‘Soviet mind’: charting the internal debate of the characters as they wrestle with the morality of their life choices. Grossman’s characters engage in a discourse with the ideological voices of the revolution, interrogating their impact on the soul of the country. In this way he makes visible Bakhtin’s notions of *dialogism* in the text: where every utterance is the product of a dialogue with another, formed by the voices of the carnival²⁶ (1986:130-145).

Flanagan praises Grossman for his groundbreaking insights into the Soviet experiment – particularly his insight in the novel *Everything Flows*, where:

Grossman argues that the great 19th-century Russian prophets, from Gogol to Dostoevsky, of the unique Russian soul believed that this soul, once fully realised, would lead the world to spiritual evolution. The fatal flaw, according to Grossman, was that all failed to see that this soul had been enslaved for a thousand years.

(Flanagan 2010:24)

Grossman connects himself with the literary traditions that sought to define the elusive Russian soul, yet his conclusion suggests a more complex view of what it means to be Russian. According to Grossman’s character, Ivan, the Soviet Experiment had continued a long tradition of serfdom. From the standpoint of 21st Century postmodernity the idea of a singular national identity might seem simplistic or illusory, but the recurring theme of a distinctive ethnic identity demands further analysis. How can I understand what it means to be Russian, or Jewish? What might help me ‘get it’? And how do I *get* what it means to sublimate who one is and try to become someone else, as my mother did when she kept her Jewish identity secret and sublimated Russian language and culture. An exploration of the place of language in identity formation, and transformation, might provide further insight.

Language, culture and identity

The language one speaks has a profound impact on one’s sense of self and how one perceives the world (Wierzbicka 1994). The Jewish Diaspora in Melbourne sees the preservation of the Yiddish language as vital to the continuation of Jewish cultural

²⁶ The carnival is the ‘laughing crowd’ – multiple individual voices within the novel—where each voice is heard and each inescapably influences and shapes the character of the other. Bakhtin’s carnival challenges the views of the ruling class. (Holquist 1984:xxii) in Bakhtin (1984).

traditions. Yiddish music and literature speak to a lost world of European Jewry and the life in the shtetls, where many Holocaust survivors lived before the war. The preservation of Yiddish language and culture for the Second Generation is driven by a complex fusion of political, social and spiritual motivations, and is rooted in the broadest concept of identity.

Mary Besemeres tackles the question of language and immigrant identity by exploring the process of translation that takes place in learning a new language and culture. She writes: 'The immigrant experience of having to "translate oneself" from one's mother tongue into a foreign language and losing part of oneself in the process shows how deeply self is bound up with natural language' (Besemeres 2002:9), implying that we come to know ourselves through the first language/s that we speak. The self is constructed not through the monolithic abstract concept of any language, but rather the particular language that one speaks which creates a sense of self that can only be understood in that language. Besemeres cites the title of Eva Hoffman's memoir, *Lost in Translation*, as an example of how a part of the self is lost in the process of moving from one language to another. Hoffman's memoir is particularly instructive because she is a writer who understands how language works and how the semantics of languages are not always translatable. More tellingly she reflects on how one's first language, or the 'natural' language as Besemeres refers to it, provides the reference point for absorbing a new interpretation of the world. Hoffman cites the word 'river' as an example:

The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. 'River' in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. 'Rivers' in English is cold – a word without an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off a radiating haze of connotation. It does not evoke.

(Hoffman 1989:106)

Hoffman's new language results in a disassociation with the object in question. She no longer experiences things in the same way because she holds on to the memory of herself as a person whose language is Polish. The process of transition, the liminal space between being a fluent speaker of Polish and a fluent speaker of English, is expressed as an inconsolable sense of loss and alienation, a loss of self. At night,

when she lies in bed, she is unable to raise the spontaneous flow of inner language, Bakhtin's sense of the inner dialogue with the self as other, for she has no language.

Nothing comes. Polish, in a short time, has atrophied, shrivelled from sheer uselessness. Its words don't apply to my new experience; they're not coeval with any of the objects, or faces, or the air I breathe in the daytime. In English, words have not penetrated to those layers of my psyche from which a private conversation could proceed...I'm not filled with language anymore, and I have only a memory of fullness to anguish me with the knowledge that, in this dark and empty state, I don't really exist.

(Hoffman 1989:108)

Hoffman's alienation from her new place and culture is expressed in every aspect of her being. Everything in her daily landscape is unfamiliar and requires the acquisition of a new symbolic order and habitus before it can become familiar. Hoffman is not alone in this migrant experience. Andrew Riemer (2012) describes the experience of arriving in an 'Australia that was not quite ready for multiculturalism' (74). His memory of learning the language is less well articulated. He writes: 'What I cannot remember at all precisely, though, is the mechanism of that process of learning, nor the point at which the confidently speaking adolescent finally emerged' (75). The contrast between Riemer's and Hoffman's description of their experience is instructive; Hoffman remembers the dissociation of the new language, while Riemer focuses on how he strove to learn the new language as quickly as possible. Each individual colours the experience of migration with their own very personal palette of perceptions and reflections.

Riemer's response to his sense of loss and longing for his former life was expressed in a determination to be successful in his new culture, to become assimilated as quickly as possible. For Riemer 'the process of learning inevitably involved the act of unlearning' (76), as he did everything possible to avoid speaking Hungarian. Yet despite this quest for assimilation he finds himself as an adult longing for a Hungary that no longer exists, unsure of where his true identity lies. The migrant experience he describes is similar to that described by Hoffman and other writers who have explored the splitting of self between two languages and cultures, and the alienation that invariably follows such dislocation.²⁷

²⁷ See for example Walwicz (1982, 1989), Besemeres & Wierzbicka (2007), Gunew & Longley (1992), Tumarkin (2007), who each also report very individual differences.

Learning the language of the new country is, however, inextricably connected with culture, which is also deeply rooted in the language. Subtleties in social and cultural practices are mirrored in the nuances of the language that is used in given contexts. Hoffman's difficulty with the English word 'river' is an example of the extent of the alienation that can be experienced when basic concepts seem unfamiliar. More alienating perhaps are the intricacies of social etiquette that are built into the language. For example, the Russian imperative *davai* (give it to me), has a very different cultural salience compared to 'May I have the book please?'.

Following on from Edward Sapir's (1949) work on language and culture, Anna Wierzbicka suggests that the study of linguistics can provide new understandings of the relationship between language and culture. She argues that language provides a symbolic guide to penetrating a culture, and that study of the vocabulary of a particular language can provide illuminating insights. By way of example she cites a number of Russian words for which there are not equivalent words in English. Translation of a word requires sentences rather than a single word. The values, ideals and attitudes embedded in languages contain the long complex history and political culture of nations. Wierzbicka writes:

In fact, the peculiarly Russian concept of *pošlost* (semantic range from banal to morally worthless) may well serve as an introduction to a whole system of attitudes, a glimpse of which we can obtain by contemplating some other untranslatable Russian words like *istina* (roughly 'higher truth'), *duša* ('soul', seen as a person's spiritual, moral and emotional core and as an internal theatre where a person's moral and emotional life goes on) *podlec* ('base person who inspires contempt'), *merzavec* ('base person who inspires disgust') *negodjaj* ('base person who inspires indignation').

(Wierzbicka 1997:25)

Posing the question 'Different words, different ways of thinking?' Wierzbicka attempts to build on her general thesis about the tendency of Russian language to emphasise 'absolutes', 'moral passions' and 'higher values' through a systematic analysis of the vocabulary of the three languages of Russian, Polish and Japanese. Culture-specific words, she argues, are conceptual tools that 'reflect a society's past experience of doing and thinking about things in certain ways' (5). They are not fixed, however, and can change over time as circumstances change. On the other hand, Pinker (1994), psychologist and cognitive scientist, sees such views as 'linguistic relativity' and belonging to the 'dark ages' preceding the advent of brain

science (253). He maintains there is no evidence that language shapes thinking and dismisses such arguments as 'all wrong'. The argument put forward by psychologists such as Pinker (1994) and Lazarus (1995) is that all people experience anger and sadness even if they do not have a word that describes it. The real question here is whether we can in fact determine if and how culture impacts on the evolution of language.

Wierzbicka counters the arguments of Pinker and Lazarus by citing numerous bilingual speakers who have given testimony to thinking and feeling differently in the different languages they speak. Poet Ania Walwicz once remarked²⁸ that her face felt different when she spoke Polish because of the different shapes she made with her mouth. Bilingual linguist Michael Clyne reflects on his own experience as a German speaker, and the different relationships he has with people who share the German language as compared to the English language (Clyne 2007:13). Wierzbicka suggests that for bilingual speakers such 'truths' are self-evident. David Crystal touches on this debate in his paper on the preservation of linguistic diversity in a rapidly globalising world.

Anthropological linguists do not dare to put a figure on it, but if one were to ask 'Just how much of a language expresses the unique mindset and behaviour of a community?' what statistics would you come up with? The fact that balanced bilinguals can provide efficient translations most of the time suggests that this figure is relatively low. And when I ask people few go beyond 25 percent. In other words when translating between English and Icelandic (or any other language pair) the assertion is that, at least 75 percent of the time, the linguistic units equate. But in the remaining 25 percent there is a great deal that is untranslatable – words which express the culturally unique features of the two languages.

(Crystal 2005:5)

Crystal argues that it is possible to communicate between cultures, as only 25 per cent of the words (concepts) are untranslatable. He does however also concede that the relationship between language and culture is complex and varied. Wierzbicka makes the case that the 25 per cent difference – the untranslatable concepts – are worthy of a cross-linguistic exploration to identify the universal concepts that can be communicated across all cultures. For Wierzbicka, the fact that different cultures have their own unique concepts is worthy of analysis and study. For my purposes

²⁸ Conversation with Ania Walwicz after writing workshop in 1998.

her insights into the Russian and Polish language are most relevant. Figes (2005), cultural historian and fluent speaker of Russian, quite independently draws our attention to the culturally unique aspects of Russian beliefs and value systems, expressed in the frequently occurring concepts of *duša* (soul) and *pravda* (truth) in the cultural artefacts of Russian society. Translatability of a concept is, however, not the only issue to be considered – the emphasis that the community places on particular concepts is also significant and provides an insight into a different cultural sensibility.

My own experience of speaking different languages (Polish, Russian, French and English) concurs with the views of Besemeres, Wierzbicka and Crystal, in that I believe some concepts simply cannot be translated from one language to another language to another and retain full meaning. Moreover, even when one can translate the basic concept with fewer or more words there is a sense that *something* is not being communicated: a certain ‘Polishness’ or ‘Russianness’, and all associations pertaining to the dialectical relationship between language and culture. Of particular interest in this discussion then are the responses of those who have made the transition from one language to another Hoffman (1989), Rodriguez (1982), Riemer (2012), and the impact those transitions have on their sense of self and identity. For Hoffman, that transition is expressed as two different Evas, the Cracow Polish Eva and the Vancouver English speaking Eva: split selves that are never completely reconciled but eventually live inside each other. In Rodriguez’s *Hunger and Memory* the link between language and identity is expressed through the personal and public voice of the author. Eakin analyses the dialectic between the ‘romantic’ references to the self in the mother tongue of Spanish, and the public English voice that critiques the lack of understanding of the complexities of acculturation from one language and culture to another that the author experienced (Eakin 1992:120-127). For Riemer, language tension is expressed as never quite belonging to any culture. The experience of migration invariably results in a transformation of one’s sense of self and how one experiences oneself in relation to the other. For my mother, those transitions were enacted within the context of a world that was literally in ruins and which seemed to have no place in it for her. She reconstructed her identity through a language and culture that offered her more hope of survival. She became a Polish Catholic. Some twenty years earlier her

mother Elisaveta had made a similar transition through embracing the ideology of Marxist Leninist communism and sublimating her Jewishness and her first language – Yiddish.

The liminal zone

The process of moving between one language and culture and another, one landscape to another, is always unsettling, and often traumatic. Hoffman captures that transition better than many, but she is not alone in the experience and in the impetus to write about the process of becoming someone else in the course of relocation. Apart from the sadness of leaving the country of one's birth, the alienation experienced by many migrants, as Ann Synan (2002) discovered when interviewing migrant women in the Latrobe Valley, is exacerbated by the attitudes of the receiving country to the foreign 'other':

Australia was a monolingual society, with few people of that time having travelled widely, particularly to non-British countries, where they might have experienced situations in which they found themselves unfamiliar with language and customs, and unable to make themselves understood.

(Synan 2002:97)

Synan writes of the Australia that Riemer described as being 'unprepared for multiculturalism' (1992:2); those who could not speak English fluently were laughed at and ridiculed, causing even greater distress and alienation.

After experiencing the trauma of war, many displaced people waited for years in temporary accommodation before their lives could begin again. My mother lived in Germany for eight years before she came to Australia, and then she lived in temporary accommodation for another three years. Her life narrative for that period is one that can best be described as living in the liminal zone – between memory and hope.

Multicultural Australia has perhaps been more open to the stories of subsequent waves of post-war migrants, such as the Vietnamese who faced the dangers of the open sea and pirates to land safely on Australian shores. The stories that I helped my former English students to write captured their mixed emotions at abandoning their homelands and starting a new life in Australia. My parents' stories, and my own experience as a migrant child, helped me to empathise with my students, as the

trauma of war and migration has informed my family life.²⁹ Art Spiegelman's (1996) representation of his parents' traumatic experience during World War II, in the graphic novel *Maus*, acts as a testimony of his own experience of living in its aftermath.³⁰ As Hirsch (2012) explains, postmemory haunts the Second Generation and demands explication.

Hayden White writes: 'The conjuring up of the past requires art as well as information' (2005:149). In writing the stories I have been told about my parents' lives during and after the war I inevitably projected my own imagined emotional responses to the sketches my mother had provided. I was surprised by some of the details she *could* remember, such as the first meal she had at the farm when she first arrived in Germany, what clothes she took with her from Russia, what people said about her, where photos were taken and so forth. She was less willing to talk about how she felt, about her inner life. She kept a diary that was unfortunately lost or stolen. We have poured over her collection of photos from Germany and she has put names to faces, and talked about her friends.

I have tried to capture the poignancy of some of her recollections and tell her story as she might were she a writer, by drawing on the insights of others. Hoffman's ability to articulate the disassociation she experienced, for example, has provided me with greater empathy for my mother's experience.

These fictional accounts, attempt to recreate the liminal spaces where identities are transformed, and where the past might easily be erased or disconnected from one's sense of selfhood. I am trying to understand how my mother could have lost a part of herself in the process of leaving the war behind and starting a new life in Australia. The fictional world helps me to explore what her experience might have been like. The following stories must, however, be read as *versions* of a truth constructed through postmemory, which is also a liminal space for the Second Generation, awaiting illumination.

²⁹ The anthology *Places Called Home* (Suda 1995) captures migrant women's memories of childhood.

³⁰ I examine Spiegelman's *Maus* in more depth in the final reflexive chapter that address the role of the psyche in self-representation, particularly the idea of postmemory and transgenerational trauma.

9. Welcome to Rhineland

Germany, September 1942.

Lena has never been in a line up before, standing like a criminal, waiting to be picked. All the glamour has gone from this adventure. She wants to be invisible, to be chosen, to be left, for this chapter to end and the next to begin.

She can feel the sweat trickling down her arm into her already sweaty palms. She is one of forty young women, lined up like raggedy paper dolls on display, ready for selection, suitcases by their side. It's easy to pick the village girls with their colourful headscarves and plaited hair, heavy shoes and socks. Lena feels awkward in the carefully selected wardrobe of a girl from the city. She surveys the group of men standing opposite. One of them will determine what kind of life she will lead over the next few months.

They don't look like farmers, more like accountants than men who work the land. Their suits are of fine woollen pinstripes or tweeds, with crisp white shirts and ties, and they are all wearing brimmed hats. Any one of them could be a man who is about to be married, or buried, in his best suit. Instead, they are standing outside the employment office in Mayen, looking for cheap labour. They wait while the clerk walks along the line of girls checking the photograph on each girl's *Arbeiter* (work) card.

Lena closes her eyes and tries to remember a poem by Pushkin that she learned in school:

In a foreign land I faithfully observe
A native rite of olden times
I liberate a little bird
During the shining fete of spring

The second verse escapes her, but the image of the bird's beak cheeping plaintively stabs her with humiliation. It is already too late to imagine that someone will liberate her. No one will come to rescue this little bird baking in the early autumn sun.

She thinks of her nights at home babysitting her brother, romantic books her only comfort. She had always dreamed of travelling to a distant land and having an adventure. Now she just wants to be home, where she can again be with her friends:

Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Lermantov, Tolstoy, and even the terrifying Gogol. She misses them so.

The clerk from the employment agency is a tall thin man with an angular face. He towers over the girls in line, despite the curve of his back. One arm hangs limply by his side, the other holds the empty box of *Arbeiter* cards. A thin trickle of sweat has formed above his upper lip and is starting to trickle over his mouth so that as he begins to talk a thin mist accompanies his words.

‘These girls have all come from the Eastern states,’ he says, ‘to help us with the harvest. You can take your pick. No more than two each. Once you have chosen your girls go to the front office and fill in the card and make sure it is stamped and dated. You can fill out the pension donation section, but it’s not compulsory for *Auslanders*.’

Lena knows that *Auslander* means ‘foreigner’: someone who doesn’t belong, someone who can be treated differently to one’s own workers. There is no going back. The past is now a million miles away, five long days and nights of travel in a cattle wagon. Only the present is real: the sun in her eyes, the men in the crowd, the knot in her throat and the gnawing uncertainty of what will happen in the next few minutes.

Inna, one of Lena’s friends, is chosen first. She is tall and strong with large hands and rosy cheeks – a face that has seen hard labour. Inna blushes and hurriedly gives Lena and Janka, her two friends from Rostov-na-Donu, a hug. Inna’s hair still smells of the delousing chemicals they were sprayed with in Lodz.

‘Good luck, and take care.’

Lena’s eyes follow Inna as she turns and walks towards the office with the farmer, clutching her suitcase in one hand and the *Arbeiter* card in the other, hips swaying loosely as she disappears from view. It isn’t long before Janka too is selected.

‘We will see each other again,’ says Janka, as she squeezes Lena’s hand and kisses her on both cheeks.

Lena does not look like a farm girl. She has not really dressed for the part either, wearing a tailored skirt and a pale pink blouse with a frill around the neckline. She realises that she has not prepared well for this trip at all, packing her favourite clothes rather than those that might be practical for farm work. Her farm experience is limited to her summer camp expeditions with the young pioneers, where they

were supposed to labour alongside their country comrades. She did have to work, but mostly they sang patriotic songs and flirted with the boys. Then she had worn her uniform: black lace up shoes and socks, a navy blue skirt, white blouse and red scarf. It never occurred to her to pack that for her trip to Germany. She had packed for an adventure, a working holiday.

Lena had imagined herself working in an office or packing supplies to send to the front. The rough ride in the cattle trucks and the fumigations they were obliged to undertake when they stopped in Lodz, Poland, made her suspect that their 'guest worker' status would not be what she had imagined. As they were waiting in line to enter the showers, one of the female attendants provided Lena and her friends with this advice:

'When you get to Wuppertal, say you want to work on the farms. It's better. The food is better, the work is better. Go to the farm.'

As the line diminishes, Lena begins to wonder whether she will be selected at all. There is now only one farmer left and three waiting to be chosen.

'Here, you take these two,' the clerk says, pointing to the other two girls. 'And you will come with me,' he says, tapping Lena on the shoulder.

Lena isn't sure what this means. She picks up her suitcase and follows the clerk to the office. He gestures for her to sit down on one of the chairs opposite a desk covered with neat piles of blank *Arbeiter* cards and a sheet of paper that has a list of names and destinations. The clerk sits down heavily in the chair and breathes out with a slow whistle, taking off his cap and placing it on a pile of papers.

'So,' he says, cheerfully. 'You speak good German. I think we will take you to my father-in-law's farm. They need some help there. Can you pick up potatoes?'

'Yes, yes,' she says, hurriedly. She is suddenly nervous as there is no else in the office.

'You must be tired. I will finish my work here and take you to the farm.'

He stands and begins to tidy the desk, scooping up the cards and placing them in a cardboard box. As he moves around Lena notices that he tends to lean to the right, as if his arm is dragging him down. A soldier he could not be. Lena is glad to be out of the sun but her face still feels flushed and her hands are trembling slightly.

The past week has been like a dream, each event seemingly disconnected from the last. Everything is a surprise. One minute she was haggling with a peasant

woman about the cost of three apples and a pear, when the train had stopped for a break in a small village. Next minute she finds herself dragged into an office by two guards.

‘You have missed your transport. It has already left. Now you will go in the soldier’s carriage.’

Lena and Janka were jostled onto another train full of wounded German soldiers returning from the front, their faces stiff with pain. As much as she tried to avoid their stares, the stain of blood seeping through flimsy gauze attracted her gaze. Her thirst for adventure has backfired and she can no longer visualise a romantic ending to this terrible journey. Nothing is as she imagined.

‘So,’ the clerk announces, scraping his chair as he stands to attention. ‘We go.’

He picks up Lena’s bag with his strong arm, and heads to the door.

‘First we will go to Polch to see my wife, and then we will go to Welling.’

Lena is happy to be riding in the front seat looking out onto the verdant fields that have wrapped themselves over the undulating curves of the countryside. She is now glad she had joined the queues for farm-workers at Wuppertal. She can see the village in the distance, the church spire rising above the rooftops of the stone cottages.

‘Do you see the village over there? That is Welling. You will be working there. But first we will come to my house.’

He turns the truck off the main road and pulls into a narrow street with several houses dotted along the road.

His wife, Mathilde, greets them at the door. Her face is thin and bony, but her smile is warm and welcoming.

‘Come, come,’ she says, upon being introduced. ‘You must be hungry. First we will eat, and then Harald can take you to my father’s house. They will be happy to receive you.’

Lena seats herself at the table as instructed and is surprised when a plate of food suddenly appears before her.

‘This is a traditional German meal, *Weinerwurst*, sauerkraut and potatoes. I hope you like it,’ Mathilde says, placing a similar plate before her husband. Mathilde then perches on a stool by the stove and watches as both of them eat in silence.

‘This is very good,’ Lena says between mouthfuls. ‘Thank you very much.’

10. Love at First Sight

Moe, May 2011

My mother is wearing a pale short-sleeved dress that appears embroidered around the collar and along the hem of the skirt. I am looking at one of the many black-and-white photographs we have from her time in Germany. She has written 'Kehrig, May 1943' on the back of the photograph. She was wearing this dress when she first met my father. I have heard the story of my parent's courtship many times before. One of the advantages of revisiting these stories now that I am a mature adult is that she no longer censors details that she once considered unsuitable for children's ears.

'What colour was this dress?'

'It was a pale green, and the embroidery was pink, white and blue. It was very nice.'

'You look suntanned and happy.'

'I was. I had just met your father. He swept me off my feet you know,' she giggles, suddenly nineteen again.

'He was so charming,' she says wistfully. 'He was nice to everyone. He made everyone feel good.'

My father's version of their courtship used to delight us children, because our mother would always protest loudly when he came to the bit about how she was the one making eyes at him.

'So were you really the one making eyes at him?'

'He said I had *kurewski oczy*,' she chuckles.

'*Kura* is a hen right? And *oczy* is eyes? Hen's eyes? Must lose something in the translation...' I mutter.

'*Kurwa*,' she says emphasising the *w* (pronounced *v*). '*Prostytutka*, a whore.'

She has a sheepish but self-satisfied grin on her face.

'That's just what he said. He didn't believe I could be so innocent, but I was.'

The other story we loved to hear was how my father had come to find my mother 'when the Americans came.' As children we had heard variations on these stories, which changed slightly as we got older. The overwhelming image I had, as a child, was that 'when the Americans came' they brought loads of chocolate, cigarettes and stockings. In revisiting these stories with my mother more recently I heard a less

sanitised version of what occurred at war's end, and a saucier version of her first meeting with my father.

Rhineland, May 1943

Lena and her friends have been invited to a gathering with other farm workers. Their host, Tajik, greets them with a broad smile and welcome arms when they arrive at the barn. The bunk beds have been pushed up against the wall, and a few wooden boxes and mounds of straw fashioned into seats are dotted around the room. Although shafts of light penetrate through the gaps in the walls and the open door the room is dimmer than outside, and Lena takes a few minutes to adjust to the absence of light. A few men are playing cards around a makeshift table planted in the centre of the room. The smell of cigarette smoke, decaying straw and men fills the air.

The farmer has converted one of his outhouses into sleeping quarters for the labourers. These are men who have come from prison camps where they slept head-to-toe on hard narrow bunks with a single blanket between them, so the accommodation is lavish by comparison. The farmer hasn't noticed the makeshift still they have constructed behind the barn, where they brew their vodka from a putrid paste of fermented crushed potatoes. They have camouflaged it with old farm equipment and hessian sacks.

'Welcome to our parlour,' Tajik says in Polish, and bows deeply.

Lena and her friends have walked three kilometres from Kehrig in the midday sun, their faces rosy with anticipation.

Tajik introduces Lena, Nadia and Lara to the card players by tapping each on the head with the cards in his hand.

Paul, Bolek, Leon and Stan doff their caps.

'Welcome!' Stan says. 'We all like Russian girls, don't we comrades?'

'None of them will dance with you, Stan, with your two left feet,' Bolek teases.

Soon, other men and women from neighbouring farms arrive. There is much teasing and joking amongst the men, each vying for the attention of one of the girls. Nadia reaches into her bag and pulls out a jar of preserved plums and holds them up for all to see.

'Look what I brought to sweeten our vodka!'

‘Ah, Nadia, what a beautiful girl you are, where did you get them?’ Tajik cries, snatching them from her hand. ‘Do we have any sugar?’

‘Sugar! Where am I supposed to find sugar?’

The bootleggers have become accomplished with their intoxicating brews, except for the harsh aftertaste, like blunt razor blades, the liquor leaves in the throat. The sweet syrup of squashed preserved plums squeezed through a coarse cloth could turn even the harshest vodka into a sweet liqueur.

There are about fifteen people scattered around the barn by the time Paul returns with two bottles of blood coloured brew. Everyone cheers as he holds them above his head victoriously.

‘Who would like the first shot? I’m sorry we only have one glass to drink from. Ladies first.’

Paul pours a small amount into the glass and passes it to Lena. She smiles and shakes her head, waving him away. He crouches down in front of her and, his face just inches from hers, takes her hand and lodges the glass between her fingers.

‘But you must try our special schnapps. It’s very good.’

Lena raises the glass to her lips to take a sip. The alcohol burns her mouth and she screws up her face and shudders.

‘No, no. One gulp, all at once, let your stomach feel it first! You don’t sip vodka,’ Paul laughs. ‘Come on, finish it off.’

Lena tilts back her head and allows the rest of the liquid to slide down her throat. She shudders again and passes the glass back to Paul, still grimacing.

The alcohol provides a welcome burst of energy to the room. Some of the men continue with their card game while others flirt with the girls.

Lena is watching Paul who is perched on the edge of a box, legs spread, with a hand rolled cigarette hanging out of his mouth while he examines his cards. She likes the way his head tilts to one side in concentration as he rearranges his cards. He takes the cigarette from his mouth and carefully blows smoke into the air, pauses, puts the cigarette back in his mouth and throws three cards into the centre of the table, indicating that he has at least two good cards in his hand. He looks in Lena’s direction and she holds his gaze for a second before examining her feet. When she looks up again he is talking to Celinka, who is leaning on his shoulder looking at his cards. She imagines that all the girls must find him attractive with his blue eyes and

playful smile. He looks sideways in her direction again. She holds his gaze for a second more this time, before turning to Nadia, who is now sitting next to her.

‘Do you know anything about Paul?’ she whispers, her hand covering her mouth.

‘I think he’s one of the Polish soldiers who came from the camps. He looks alright now though, doesn’t he? His farmer must feed him well.’

Nadia proceeds to fill Lena in on the life histories of the Polish soldiers she knows. The vodka has made Lena feel lightheaded and the spirited banter of the group has made her forget the reality of their situation.

‘Enough cards. Time to sing and dance!’ Bolek calls out and starts to waltz around the room singing in Russian:

The apple and pear trees are in blossom,
River mists have begun their floating flow,
She came out and went ashore, Katyusha!

‘No, we have to sing in Polish. *Hanka Ordonówna*. Love will forgive you everything!’

Other voices join the chorus:

Love will forgive you everything,
Your sadness will turn into joy.

The cheerful tune of a harmonica joins the accompaniment and Lena feels the melody bubbling in her veins. The burst of music has come from Paul, who is now standing with a small harmonica held to his mouth. More voices join in, and others clap in time with the music. Lena leaps to her feet and begins to sway from side to side, tapping her feet and clapping her hands. Paul changes tune and starts on a Russian melody. Lena crouches onto her haunches, with her hands on her hips, and throws out first one leg and then the other. Everyone in the room cheers and claps.

‘Oh, look, we have a Cossack in our midst!’

‘She’s good at this!’

‘That’s because she comes from the Don region. They all dance like that!’

Lena is caught in the moment. Her body remembers the dance of the river Don. The men fold their arms against their chests while the women place theirs on their hips. The cheering of the crowd is spurring her on and Paul seems to be playing faster and

faster. Others join in trying to copy her and fall over. Finally she is exhausted; she loses her balance and topples onto the floor to uproarious cheers.

‘Oh, you are obviously a good Cossack girl,’ laughs Paul, and offers her his hand. ‘Did you come with the Rostov transport last year?’

‘Yes,’ is all Lena can manage, panting to regain her breath.

‘Would you like some water, you must be thirsty after that?’ Paul has his hand against the small of her back.

There are calls for more music and Paul is drawn back into the centre of the room. His harmonica provides the sole source of music for the party. Lena’s eyes follow him as he dances his way across the room to his own accompaniment. More people join him on the floor, in noisy and energetic dancing, singing and clapping hands. He slings his arm around Celinka’s waist, and continues playing the harmonica while they twirl. Then he changes partners and works his way around the room; Lena’s turn comes, and he lifts her off her feet and spins her around and around without stopping for breath. Their bodies move as one as though they have danced together many times before.

They continue like this into the afternoon – with laughter, song and yet more vodka.

Finally, they are reminded that people have kilometres to walk and animals to tend. Paul, Tajik and Bolek offer to walk Lena and her friends back to the village. They set off on a path that crosses fields filled with neat rows of small potato plants. The others race ahead while Paul and Lena linger behind.

‘How did you learn to speak Russian so well?’ Lena asks.

‘Where I come from there are a lot of Ukrainians and Poles living together. We speak a bit of all languages,’ Paul stoops down to pull a weed from the side of a potato plant. ‘That damn grass, it’s so hard to keep out of the fields.’

‘How long have you been here in Kehrig?’

‘Only a few months. I was at another farm for a long time, and then they sent me to work on the roads. That was hard work. I like it better here.’

‘So you worked on a farm back home?’

‘No. Well, yes. We had a shop, but we had some land too.’

Paul is not telling the truth, but he doesn't want Lena to think he is a simple peasant with no education. He can see that she is different to the other girls. She is a little shy but he likes the way she moves when she dances, especially with him.

'What sort of shop?' she asks, stooping to pick a clump of grass from between the seedlings.

'Oh, just a small shop in the village, nothing much, just a little bit of everything.' He doesn't want to lie too much. 'Look how far ahead of us they all are.'

'Yes, they are dancing their way home,' she laughs. 'We should try and catch them up.'

'There's no rush. Maybe you are tired after all that dancing. We could sit down for a bit and have a little rest.'

Lena's reaction is sharp and dismissive.

'What do you think I am? I'm not the girl for that sort of thing,' she snaps and strides off ahead of him.

Paul laughs, running after her and catches her arm.

'No, no! Don't worry,' he laughs. 'I wouldn't do anything you didn't want. A man would be a fool to tackle a girl who dances the Cossack like that!'

She laughs and her body relaxes again. 'Come on then, let's catch up with the others.'

When they are almost at the village, Paul stops and takes Lena's left hand raising it briefly to his lips.

'I'll see you next time,' she smiles, and holds his gaze.

'Until we meet again,' he bows deeply, and touches his hand to his heart.

Tajik grabs Paul by the shoulders, turns him around and pushes him back onto the path.

'Enough of that, lover boy. Let's go. We've got a game to finish.'

Tajik pushes Paul ahead of him and starts singing in Polish:

'Maybe you will be my princess...'

Bolek joins in the refrain:

'And if you are my princess, surely my heart will wake.'

11. When the Americans Came

Rhineland, May 1945

Stars glisten in the afternoon sun as a group of planes buzz overhead. Paul stops hoeing and looks to the sky. The white stars framed in blue circles stencilled on the side of the planes fill him with joy. The whistle of the first bomb quickly deflates his euphoria. A shower of fiery metal fills his vista and the earth quakes with the arrival of the American liberation. He knows that the planes are just clearing the path for their artillery, but there are no soldiers in these fields and few barriers to obstruct the armoured vehicles that must be following. Paul hits the ground and covers his head with his hands, but then jumps up and begins to run across the field.

His heart is pounding and his boots are caked in mud as he pushes himself across the sodden earth. He hits the ground whenever he hears the whiz of a bomb, which thuds as it hits the ground, followed by a deafening explosion. The earth erupts with dirt, flames and bits of metal. He has run this path many times, but not with such haste. One kilometre now seems like ten, but he pushes himself forward with only one destination in mind.

‘Lena, Lena!’ he shouts, as he runs into the yard of Mueller’s farm. ‘Lenie, where are you?’

There is general panic. Mueller’s daughter is hobbling on her walking sticks towards the cellar. He opens the hatch, and hands reach up for her.

‘Where is Lena?’

‘She was in the barn, putting out hay,’ Mueller answers. ‘I don’t know where she is now.’

One of the haystacks is on fire and he can see smoke coming from the barn: orange sparks have caught on the roof.

‘Lena!’ he shouts, running towards the barn.

Then he sees her head peering through a tiny window near the door, her eyes filled with terror. Soon he is holding her in his arms and trying to calm her shaking. He strokes her hair and kisses her forehead. The last of the planes fly overhead, leaving a pall of smoke over the valley and a flicker of flames from distant haystacks and sheds.

‘They are American planes,’ he says. ‘The Americans have come to save us.’

Lena clings to Paul, gripping his back with both hands.

‘I was so frightened, when I heard those planes. I was too frightened to go to the cellar. There were too many people.’

‘It’s alright. I’m here.’

‘The bombs are so loud, and everyone started screaming. “Americans! Americans!” But they are dropping bombs!’

‘They just wanted to let us know they were coming. The war is over!’

He is trying to sound happy, but fear is still coursing through his veins.

‘What will happen to us? Will they take you back to Poland with the army? Will I have to go back to Russia?’

‘No, that won’t happen, it won’t happen. I won’t let it happen.’

They are clutching each other as if it is their last moment on earth. Paul holds Lena even closer. She is shaking and trying to control her breath.

‘I will never leave you,’ he gasps, finally able to let air into his lungs. ‘I will never go anywhere without you. I promise. I will never leave you.’

Their desperate embrace is interrupted by shouting and the sound of gunfire.

‘What’s happening now?’

‘We have to go and see what is happening at Farmer Ackerman’s,’ Paul says and takes Lena’s hand. ‘Bolek has been threatening to slit their throats when the Americans finally come.’

‘Why would he do that? What for?’

‘He wants revenge against Ackerman for trying to get at Laura. He’s crazy. He could do anything.’

They hurry down the road towards the Ackerman farm. Lena realises that others are running across the fields, escaping into the valley, following the path of the American planes. The long awaited liberation has arrived, but she can’t imagine what might happen next. She has become accustomed to this life. Paul has introduced her to a self she never knew. She feels safe with him. But now they are running towards smoke and the baying of animals, while others seem to be running in all directions calling out:

‘The Americans, the Americans! We are saved! The war is over!’

Ackerman’s barn is on fire, and they can hear the terrified howls of the animals locked inside. Paul lets go of Lena’s hand and rushes towards the barn. He lifts the

latch and stands aside as two horses and two cows sprint out of their fiery cell. He then runs around to the front of the house where he sees Bolek loading furniture and trunks onto the back of a cart.

‘What are you doing?’ Paul shouts at him. ‘What the hell are you doing, you son-of-a-bitch?’

‘Helping myself, they won’t need it after I’ve finished with them.’

‘Don’t be an idiot! It’s over, the war is over.’

‘They’re Germans, they don’t deserve to live. I’m going to burn them all alive!’

When Bolek and Paul were released from the *Stalag* they were so weak they had to help each other up onto the trucks. Now they are locked in a different kind of embrace, pulling at each other’s shirts, their chests pushing against each other in a test of strength. Bolek’s face is red with fury and hatred. He spits into Paul’s face and punches him.

‘You stupid Nazi lover, what are you doing? Let me go! I’m going to burn the sons-of-bitches alive!’

‘You will have to kill me first!’ Paul lunges at Bolek from behind and gets him in a headlock. Bolek tries to kick Paul, but loses his footing.

Paul has gained the upper hand and pins Bolek down on the ground, his knees digging into Bolek’s shoulders, his hands grasping his head, pleading with his friend.

‘This is crazy. No more killing. The war is over. No more killing.’

Laura, her arms full of clothes from Frau Ackerman’s wardrobe, is standing next to Lena, her face wet with tears.

‘He’s right, Bolek. You don’t want blood on your hands.’

Paul has released Bolek, who is scrambling to his feet and dusting off his shirt. Paul wipes the blood from the corner of his mouth with his shirtsleeve, then spits on the ground.

‘It’s over. Get out of here.’

‘I’m taking the horse and cart.’

‘It’s not yours to take. Just go, or I will...’

‘Bolek,’ Laura pleads. ‘Think of our baby.’

‘One day you will thank me for saving you from your own madness,’ Paul says.

‘The war is over. Go home. Live in peace.’

Paul then heads to the cellar where the Ackermans are cowering in fear.

12. Life in the DP Camp

Melbourne, October 2008

Some of the more interesting conversations I have with my mother occur when I least expect them. Sometimes, with little prompting, she can pour a story out almost fully formed. At the end of one of our usual Sunday night phone conversations, I ask,

‘What was it like living in Wildflecken?’

She had mentioned the Displaced Persons (DP) camp in Wildflecken in our last interview, when she had described the birth of her first child. My mother is extraordinarily good with dates and the names of towns and regions, but generally offers few details that capture a sense of the place or the moment that she narrates. She gets distracted if she forgets a key name or date and becomes preoccupied with the chronology of events, rather than the story she is trying to tell. To get to those details it is necessary to approach the story from a different direction. The stories my parents recounted of their time in Germany were like well-trodden short cuts across treacherous terrain, as if they had written and revised the script together. Fleshing out the details required persistence on my part. On this occasion I seemed to have hit on the right question.

‘Your father was a very good businessman. He knew how to make deals. Everything was on the black market. We didn’t have anything. There wasn’t enough food, just chocolate and cigarettes from the American soldiers that we sold to get essential items. I had to smile at the soldiers and pretend to smoke to get them,’ she laughs.

‘We were living in the DP camp in Wildflecken. That was towards the end. We had moved from one camp to another before then. We were sharing a room with another couple, with just a curtain between us. We slept just in one single bed with army blankets. Your father used to go to the next village to see what he could buy. I don’t know where he got things, or where the people he bought things from got those things, but it was all on the black market. Somehow they got things, and he would buy a lot of one thing and then come back to our camp to sell them. We didn’t have anything, so you sold one thing, like handkerchiefs or singlets, and got something else for it, and it went around like that. There wasn’t anything in the shops, so the black market was the only way to get anything. You could get lots of

things but it was all swindling and handling. People whispered to each behind the barracks – “Psst do you have any cigarettes? Have you got some sugar? I have some stockings.” We swapped one thing for another.

‘The DP camp was an old army camp, so we lived where the soldiers once slept. We ate off tin plates and drank out of tin mugs. We had to do whatever we could to make life a little bit easier. It was a very hard life. But your father was a real handler – he did all that very well.

‘The women in the camp liked him because he understood that they needed things, what you call them... *Binti... Modess* [sanitary napkins]. He would go off on his bike and come back with a big box full of them, but, you know, he never touched them. He would just whisper “*Pani, mam coś dla pani*. [Madam, I’ve got something here for you.] Look in the box. Here is some paper for wrapping. Take how many you need and pay me the money.”

‘He was so charming about it... so shy. He never looked to see how many they took. He didn’t think it was right to see the napkins women had to use. But your father used to help his mother deliver babies. He had seen everything as a little boy. Anastacja would help the women in the village deliver their babies and he would help her: boil the water, and hold things. He was just a little boy. He saw everything. You wouldn’t believe what he saw.

‘I didn’t know anything when we had Peter. He knew how to wrap a baby, how to make it go to sleep, how to make it burp, everything. He was a better mother than me.’ She giggles at the memory.

When my mother gets on a roll like this it’s astonishing what she can remember. It is as if the membrane of memory is ruptured and stories spill out in a gush. 1945-1950 is a series of images – of people, places, deals, great success, hunger, longing, love, companionship, camaraderie.

‘We just did whatever we had to do to survive,’ she says reflectively. ‘I don’t know how you expect me to remember this, it was 60 years ago!’

‘But what did you do with yourself all day?’

‘Well, I couldn’t sew. I couldn’t knit. I couldn’t speak Polish. I had to learn all these things. I learned how to sew by hand. I never did that at home. I just read romance novels. I read all the famous Russian novels. But I did know how to

embroider. The little lady who lived down stairs showed me how to do beautiful embroidery.

‘Anyway, I asked the Polish people for their books and I asked them to explain their alphabet. How do you say sz and cz and wsz. I knew that alphabet because I had studied German at school. I taught myself to read Polish. Your father couldn’t help me with that because he didn’t know how to read himself, and he was embarrassed about that, so I never asked him. But he knew how to say the words properly so he used to correct me with that. It was easy learning Polish because everyone was speaking it. They talked about great Polish writers, like Sienkiewicz, so I had to learn how to read as well to get on with everyone. I had to learn how to sew so I could fix my clothes – to get a big dress and fix it to fit me. That’s what I had to do to survive. We had to make do with what we had.

‘I remember one time your dad came back with a parachute he found in a shed somewhere. It was beautiful cream silk. We cut it up and made dresses, and then used some to cover a box to make a crib for the baby. There was so much material everyone took a bit and made something with it. Everyone was getting married, so we shared one wedding dress and veil in turn. Then, when everyone was married, we made christening dresses for the babies and used the veils to cover the pram. That’s how we did it. Nothing was wasted.

‘Of course, back then everything took a long time. We did everything by hand. We didn’t have washing machines, and there were no sewing machines in the camp. I had to learn how to do everything. I was never a wife before. I was a child. I was married, and I had to clean and wash clothes and darn socks and fix things. We did everything ourselves.’

Migration

My parents lived in Germany as displaced people for five years after the war, before they came to Australia in 1950. Their decision to come to Australia was based on their determination to stay together at any cost, so they waited until they could travel together rather than accepting offers for the husband to go ahead to America and the wife and children to follow once employment and accommodation were secured. My parents often said this was the best decision they made – to come to Australia rather than go to the other countries that were offering to accept

displaced people from post-war Europe. Australia welcomed migrants from Europe as part of its 'Populate or Perish' catch cry as described in this extract from the Department of Immigration website:

The perception that Australia needed a larger population was emphasised by threats to Australia in World War Two. There was a feeling that such a small population in charge of a vast land could not defend itself. These perceptions gave way to the catch cry 'Populate or Perish'.

(Department of Immigration website)³¹

While there may have been widespread support for the general principles behind the immigration program, the reality of accommodating such a large number of migrants proved to be a massive logistical operation. The National Archives of Australia website provides a photographic profile of the scale of that operation. Most of the early immigration centres were set up in former Army and Air Force camps, as were the DP camps in Germany. The accommodation was basic, with shared washing and eating facilities (National Archives of Australia).³²

The images on these websites seem familiar to me in that they mirror many of the photographs my parents acquired during their early years in Australia. As 'assisted migrants' they were required to work in areas where labour was required. After five years of moving from one DP camp to another in Germany, they arrived in Melbourne, in May 1950. My mother was pregnant with Henry, who was born three months later. Initially they were taken to Bonegilla Migrant Reception Centre where they waited to be allocated their workplace. After a month they were relocated to West Sale Migrant Holding Centre but my father was required to work in Yallourn, some eighty kilometres away. The following story attempts to capture that experience from my mother's point of view, based on her accounts of life in that camp, focussing on the transition from one language and culture to another. Synan's (2002) account of interviews she conducted with migrant women, Sestokas' (2010) account of the men's work camp in Yallourn, and the textbook 'English for Newcomers to Australia', that was widely used in migrant centres, helped to fill out some of the details.

³¹ <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/statistics/federation/timeline1.pdf> (Accessed October 2013)

³² <https://www.destinationaustralia.gov.au/site/themes.php?clear=1&type=thm&thid=11> (Accessed October 2013)

13. English for New Australians

West Sale Migrant Holding Centre, 1951

‘Good Morning. My name is Grace,’ the teacher enunciates each word, clearly and slowly. ‘What is your name?’ she asks, pointing to a woman in the front row.

‘Regina,’ the woman responds.

‘Say, “Good morning. My name is Regina.”’

Regina giggles nervously, holding her hand to her mouth, then responds with the correct form.

Lena and Maria³³ are also sitting in the front row, so they know they will be asked to repeat the same pattern. They each mentally rehearse the words to themselves. Learning English is high on Lena’s list of priorities. Already the women in the camp have been helping each other sew clothes for their children, and exchange recipes for favoured Polish dishes. Lena has taught Maria how to embroider the edges of a piece of cotton, for use as a doily to cover the enamel water jug so flies and insects can’t get in, while Maria has helped her make a Christening gown for Henry’s baptism. English is something they cannot teach each other.

‘Good morning, my name is Helen,’ she says quickly, when it is her turn. She is not yet used to saying her name the English way. The English translation of her name makes her feel as if she is biting off a piece of herself, but she wants to be Helen, not Helena or Elena as she is called in Polish or Russian.

‘Good morning, my name is Maria,’ her friend has not had to change her name. The group consists mostly of women, with only a few men. Since arriving at the West Sale camp from Bonegilla, many women have been left to care for the children while their husbands have gone off to different parts of the Latrobe Valley to work. Once a fortnight, a bus brings the men back to the holding centre to visit their families for the weekend. Their eldest son Mietek is always so excited when his father arrives that he often forgets to go to the toilet, and Lena has to change his trousers and rinse them out by hand along with Henry’s nappies. The laundry facilities are in short supply, given the demand of many families with young children, so Lena keeps a bucket of water in their room for such emergencies.

³³ Derivations of the English name *Mary* are very common in Polish and Russian culture. Maria is a Russian friend and later we meet Marisha, who is a Polish friend.

‘This is a ball,’ says the teacher, once everyone has introduced themselves. ‘Say after me...’

‘This is a ball,’ they all say together.

The teacher writes the words on the board.

This is a ball.

That’s a stick.

This is:

a flag

a ring

a bottle

a table

a board

a window

*a cigarette.*³⁴

‘Now say it with me... this is a ball. That’s a stick.’

Lena is familiar with this lesson. It is the same first lesson that she had attended in Bonegilla. The teacher is obviously using the same book. It doesn’t matter; she will learn to say these words even better. She is worried about Mietek. He misses his father so much it is impossible to peel him off when it is time for Paul to go back to Yallourn:

‘Don’t go, Daddy,’ he cries, hugging his father’s leg.

‘I have to go to work, so I can bring you some more chocolate next time.’ Paul pats his son on the head.

‘I don’t want chocolate,’ Mietek cries, clinging to his father.

‘Here is a ball,’ she says in English.

Lena is a good student. When the children are asleep she goes over her lessons and writes out the notes she has copied from the board. When she first arrived in Germany she used to spend her nights copying sections out of old magazines to brush up on the German she had learnt at school. Then when it was time to learn Polish she had done the same. Her friend Olga had given her a book by Sienkiewicz to read. It was called *The Knights of the Cross*.

³⁴ All texts that the teacher writes on board are taken from *English for Newcomers to Australia*, prepared by the Commonwealth Office of Education, First Edition – July 1948:9.

‘Read this book, and you will learn to speak perfect Polish,’ she’d insisted.
‘Sienkiewicz is the best writer Poland has produced.’

Lena adores love stories and the gallant Zbyszko was just her sort of hero, so she learned to read quickly as she was anxious to find out what happened next in the story. Not only is Zbyszko a brave soldier, he is handsome and kind. He sweeps the lovely Danuta off her feet, just as Paul had done to her. She wishes this teacher would just give her a love story to read in English so she could learn this language quickly too.

This a flag

This is a British Flag

This is the Australian Flag

That is a star

This is the moon

This is the sun (11).

Lena is dreaming of the day when they can move into their own house so she can make curtains to put on the windows. She copies down the words from the blackboard. It is so hard living in one room. The walls are as thin as paper and she can hear the woman in the next room crying herself to sleep each night. First it is her baby who cries and then, when he is asleep, she starts with a whimper at first and then full-blown sobbing. Lena has had enough of tears, but occasionally she too allows herself a quiet snuffle into the pillow. She knows that Paul has to work off his contract – two years work in return for the fare for his family to come to Australia with him. They had waited for this opportunity, so they could come together, but Lena hadn’t imagined that they would be separated like this, and for so long.

She likes the other women in the camp and has made many friends amongst the Polish women. She and Maria are both native Russian speakers who have married Polish men. They have this in common. They are both high school educated and can speak languages other than their native tongue. Many of the other women in the camp are girls from the village who haven’t had the opportunity to go to school, and can’t read all that well in their own language. There are all sorts of people here in the camp, but the different nationalities tend to stick together. Maybe it will be different once they all learn to speak English, Lena thinks.

This is the Peel family

Mr. Peel is a man

Mrs. Peel is a woman

Bobbie Peel is a boy

Annie Peel is a girl

Baby Peel is a little child (a baby) (16).

She doesn't understand why her Polish friend Marisha, won't come to class.

Marisha says it is because little Yuri frets too much when she is gone. Many of the women don't come to class. They think they will learn later. Mietek is happy to stay with their neighbour Roma, and Henry mostly sleeps at this time in the morning. She is worried that Marisha won't learn enough English to be able to go out and work when the children are older. Lena wants to work. She always imagined that she would be able to work one day. Once the children are bigger she will definitely look for work. Her Rostov-na-Donu dreams of working in a laboratory mixing chemicals and making new discoveries are long behind her now. The first bombs that were dropped on her city put an end to that dream.

The sun is shining.

It is a sunny day.

Australia is a land of sunshine.

The sun shines in the day.

The moon shines at night.

The days are sunny and the nights are clear.

We see the shining stars in the sky (20).

Lena tries not to remember that day, the terror she felt, the panic of the people around her. It was better not to think of those things. They had come here to get away from all that. Nobody here knows her secrets. She was brought up in Russia but her father was Polish, from Bialystock. Her parents were communists. This much she lets them know. Everyone has their secrets here. They have all come to escape the madness of Europe.

I am in Australia. I am not in Europe.

Australia is my new home. I am learning English.

I am in the classroom. Before me is my teacher.

I have my lessons in the morning.

I have my troubles – so has everyone else. (31)

The camp is about 10 km out of the main town Sale, at the RAAF base. Everything is freshly painted and clean, and there is plenty of food. The landscape seems empty to Lena's eye. There is nothing for miles around; the land is flat and dry with nothing but grass and a few stunted trees. The wind rushes across the plain without restraint. The children make a game of chasing bits of paper blowing in the wind. They run everywhere and make their own fun. Lena has to watch Mietek, because within seconds he could be running along the railway line on the other side of the field.

She has to remind herself that compared to the camps in Germany this camp is very good. She has a whole room for herself and the children. It is small but homely. It reminds her a little of her little alcove at home. She does not dare to miss her home. It is so far away now both in time and distance that it almost doesn't exist. All of that is the past, and this is her future. The war destroyed the past. She has so much to look forward to. She has a wonderful husband, two little boys and many opportunities. She is used to waiting.

'Don't worry. When we have our own house, everything will be different,' Paul assures her, every time she sees him.

He does not want to be separated from his little boys either. Mietek is three-and-a-half and Henry just six months old. Paul knew more about looking after babies than she did when Mietek was born. He would nurse Mietek for hours when he was restless. He knew how to make him laugh.

Henry was born here in the west Sale base hospital. She was all alone, and Paul did not see his new son until he was three weeks old. It was different when Mietek was born. They were in the DP camp in Wildflecken. Paul was pacing anxiously outside the hospital trying to find the room where she was giving birth. He tried climbing up the wall or jumping up to see through the window. His efforts were wasted however, as the window was too high. He didn't see anything, but then it was only a matter of days before he could hold his little son in his arms.

'See how he kicks his legs! Let's call him Mieczyslaw, after Mieczyslaw Batsch. He will be a great soccer player just like him,' he had proclaimed.

Lena had convinced him to name him Piotr (Peter) Mieczyslaw, thinking that Peter would be a more common name in Australia or Canada.

'We have to think of where we are going. Mieczyslaw is a Polish name.'

Paul had relented, but still used the diminutive form of Mieczyslaw or Mietek when speaking to his son. Lena tried to call him Peter but gave up in the end and called him Mietek as well. In documents, however, she always writes his full name as Peter Mieczyslaw.

Migrants come from Europe to Australia.

Is Australia near Europe?

No, Australia is a long way from Europe.

Is Germany near here?

No, Germany is a long way from here.

Is Russia near here?

No, Russia is a long way from here.

Were you near this camp last year?

No, we were a long way from here (37).

Lena hopes that one day they will be able to move closer to where Paul is working, that they might have a third child, hopefully a girl, and be able to live together all of the time. The weekends are so short and there is always a christening party for a baby or a Communion party for the older children. Everyone joins in and creates a merry atmosphere. The men collect vodka on their way, and a little sausage. The kitchen staff let them bake a cake or two. They make their own fun.

She thinks it must be easier to learn English for the women with older children – children who attend the West Sale primary school. Maria had told her that her son brought home a book to help him learn to read.

‘It’s a nice story about a boy called John and a girl called Betty, and a dog,’ she’d said. ‘But of course it doesn’t tell you how to buy things at the shops.’

This was the hardest thing for them all when they first arrived. They could only point and grunt at things, using hand gestures and their eyes. Everyone had their favourite story to tell about a time they were made to feel foolish because they didn’t know the language. Paul would have tears in his eyes retelling the story of his friend Alfonse attempting to buy pigs’ trotters in the butcher’s shop.

‘He stood in the butcher’s shop pointing at his hands and feet, trying to show them where they would be cut off, and snorting, like a pig! *Oink Oink!* It was so funny. The butcher just stood there looking at him, so Alfonse just snorted louder and tried to make his hands look like pigs’ trotters.’

Lena liked the story of how Paul had tried to buy her a new bra after Henry was born. He went into the department store in Yallourn and tried to find a shop attendant who was about the same size. His gesturing caused the shop assistant to be so embarrassed she ran off into the men's department and brought one of the male shop assistants to help out.

'You did a good job,' she assured him. 'It fits perfectly.'

Other stories are not as amusing. The men's camp in Yallourn North where Paul is living has men from many countries, but they are not always friendly to each other. Old hatreds break out. Sometimes there are fights. The single men are the worse, Paul tells her, because they spend their money on alcohol and get drunk, and then they feel sorry for themselves. Some of them hate Australia and wish they had never come. It is the same with some of the women.

'Why have we come here to live in another camp in this wasteland?' they wail.

Lena doesn't feel like that. She knows that she and Paul would not be together if they had gone back to Poland. They had heard that in some of the DP camps in East Germany, Russian soldiers had come through and loaded all the Russian women onto trucks and taken them back to Russia. Other Polish and Russian couples were separated at the border. Paul had heard these stories when he was working on the roads with the Americans. They were warned not to cross over into Soviet occupied territory. Some people said the Russians shot people who had worked for the Germans, while others were taken to Siberia to work in the labour camps. It didn't matter if you were a prisoner or forced to work, you were considered an enemy or, at least, to have helped the enemy. You couldn't be trusted. She was frightened by these stories. The best thing was to not look back.

She is learning English quickly but there are some things she has trouble with. The teacher corrects her but Lena can't hear the difference between what the teacher says and what she has just said.

'Now listen carefully,' Grace says. 'Which is the right one?'

- (a) We are listening always to the teacher.
- (b) We always are listening to the teacher.
- (c) We always listen to the teacher(44).

They all mean the same, as far as Lena can hear. She listens very carefully but can't hear the difference. She shrugs her shoulders and throws up her hands.

‘What about this one?’ the teacher asks.

(a) We get always our money on Saturday.

(b) We always get on Saturday our money.

(c) We always get our money on Saturday (44).

Lena can hear that it is slightly different but the meaning is the same. She and Maria talk about this later.

“‘Always listen’ or ‘Listen always’. It’s the same. I think here it matters. It is what makes us new Australians and the teacher Australian.’

‘I think I will always be a new Australian,’ Lena says despondently.

‘We are in Australia!’ Maria exclaims in English, and squeezes Lena’s shoulder.

‘We are not in Europe,’ Lena replies, in English.

14. Image as Text: the Family Gaze

‘I studied the little girl and at last rediscovered my mother.’

(Barthes 1981:69)

My parents arrived in Australia with two suitcases and a shoulder bag that contained their official documents and photographs. My father had taken only one photograph when he left home to join the Polish army in 1939. That photograph became the only surviving image of his mother Anastacja, who died of natural causes during the war, as everything the family owned was destroyed when their *hatka* was torched in the final stages of the war. My mother took four photographs when she left home as a 17 year old. These are the only visual evidence I have to connect her to her past. One is a portrait of her mother; another of her step-father Pavel nursing his baby son in their back yard; the third is an image of Victor at age six, dressed in a sailor’s suit and cap standing next to a tree; and the other is an image of my mother at age thirteen with three year old Victor sitting on her lap. These ‘ghostly revenants’ (Hirsch 1997:22), are all that we have to imagine who these family members might have been when they lived. We look into their eyes and wonder which self gazes out from the frame of the photograph, who were they looking at, what were they thinking in that moment when the light captured their image in the camera? What truths do these images contain? What kind of window to the past do they provide? Can they assist in filling in the gaps, in constructing my truth?

The visual image has its own powerful imperative. It compels us to look and invites us to see, to notice, to wonder, and to think. Visual reality is able to transmit a significant amount of data in any given moment, too much for one eye and mind to process at the time of seeing. The camera attempts to capture a slice of that data and to focus our attention on a frozen moment. Benjamin (1969:10) suggests that the camera ‘introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses’. The viewer is not immediately aware of everything that the eye sees, or how the mind processes what it sees, so the initial response is generally followed by further observation and processing. Family photographs provoke a particular kind of gaze that is simultaneously familiar but distant. In this chapter I want to explore family images, and how our seeing is shaped by personal and cultural subjectivities. Given the tantalising glimpses of the past that my parents’

photographs offer, I want to examine the role that the photographic image can play in the writing process and its utility for fulfilling the desire for truth and authenticity in my family history.

Barthes (1981) suggests that the photograph authenticates reality because: 'I can never deny that the thing has been there' (76). Compared to a painted image, the nature of photography is such that the photograph can 'compel me to believe its referent had really existed' (77). The truth of the image he studies, however, rests in his reading of it – 'I had induced the truth of the image, the reality of its origin; I had identified truth and reality in a unique emotion' (77). Barthes' analysis of the Winter Garden photograph of his mother when she was a young girl informs his meditation on the nature of photography and provides a way of thinking about our relationship to family photographs.

Building on Barthes' meditations on photography Hirsch (1997) surmises that 'as the only material traces of an irrecoverable past, photographs derive their power and their cultural role from their embeddedness in the fundamental rites of family life' (5). The rites that Hirsch alludes to here, and the cultural role that is enacted in the collection, arrangement and successive viewing of family photographs, can play an important role in the reconstruction of a family history. That process requires an understanding of the nature of the image as text. While the image might capture a moment in time, what it means to the viewer is more complex and not necessarily what it might at first seem. John Berger (1977) suggests: 'The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled... the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight' (7). The implication here is that the experience of seeing is not easily captured or communicated with words. Not only is there too much data to see but our ability to process and make sense of what we see is determined by a range of variables. Just as writers and readers construct meaning in written texts based on what they know and believe, both the creator and viewer of an image, Berger argues, construct meaning that is affected by what they know and what they believe. The effect of the image may also have its own 'unconscious optic', as Benjamin suggests, which demands an analysis of the visual qualities as well as the contextual features of an image.

The photograph is like 'a meditation', according to Gombrich (1988:v), that draws the viewer into a world that represents a frozen moment in time. What exists

beyond the frame has not been captured. This mystique that every photograph contains might account for our compulsive fascination with photographic images, which provide, as Sontag (1977:23) suggests, 'inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy'. The frozen moment allows us to reflect on what we are seeing. Even the most casually shot photograph represents the conscious attempt by an observer to capture a moment they are seeing in a particular context, to which they have attributed meaning and significance. Sontag (1977) writes: 'to photograph is to confer importance' (23), to accord value to the subject. What the viewer sees is not what still *is*, or even what *was* the real thing, for as Barthes (1981) explains: 'The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body that was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant' (80-81). Such is the alchemical nature of the photograph that light becomes 'a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed' (81). More than this, the slice that is captured excludes the context that surrounds it.

I enter the impalpable still life of the photographic world to better understand the potential of images as a resource for exploring the biographical subject. I want to understand how the photograph can operate as a character portrait, as a form of evidence that someone or something existed, as a reflection of the values and beliefs of the times they inhabited, as a meditation on the past, so as to be able to adjudicate on the limitations of the photograph to provide access to the true character of the subject. In the case of family photographs the viewer has significant investment in the truth of the image as it is their familial truth, their historical legacy.

Hirsch (1997) explains how the domestication of photography provided 'the means by which family memory would be continued and perpetuated, by which the family's story would henceforth be told' (7). What is at stake then is how my analysis of our family photographs might inform future generations who might gaze at the same images. As Hirsch surmises, 'the familial gaze situates human subjects in the ideology, the mythology of the family as institution and projects a screen of familial myths between camera and subject' (11). My interpretations presume a paradigmatic image of 'family', which is a problematic concept in itself, as the family is always constituted by the social, cultural, economic and historical context of the

times in which it is located. My task is to deconstruct some of the familial myths and gaps surrounding my mother's family in order to uncover the truth of what happened to them.

A cursory reading of the four images my mother took with her let me know that these people existed in the past, 'they were there' (Barthes 1981:82) in a place called Rostov-na-Donu, in a house on the corner of Buddonovsk Prospect and Lermontovska, where there was a garden with a bench that one could sit on. I can see that they also had the means to have photographs taken in a studio with a professional photographer. I see that the father held his child and the sun was shining in his eyes, the sister was photographed with her brother sitting on her lap, her chin touching the top of his head, the boy stood in a garden with his hand resting on the trunk of a tree wearing a sailor suit that was too big for him, and the mother wore a hair pin to hold the wave of her hair in place and looked sternly down at the camera operator. Although I can see all this a closer reading of these photographs might reveal a deeper truth; one where a critical understanding of the photographic medium might serve to penetrate the opaqueness of the image as text.

The concept of the photograph

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes (1981) embarks upon a journey to uncover and name the 'genius' of photography, to understand what photography is 'in itself'. He wanted to move beyond the technical analysis of the photographic composition of a landscape, or the family rite of capturing events that can become the subject of sociological analysis. 'I wanted to be primitive, without culture' (7), Barthes says, like Berger's (1977) child who can see and recognise long before it is able to speak, for whom the image 'never quite matches the sight' (7). It was the essence of the photograph as object, and his emotional response to it, that Barthes wanted to explore in this book. His responses to particular photographs and his analysis of their impact on him are, however, expressed in the context of a broader narrative, the narrative of his times, and densely peppered with images to illustrate his thinking. He creates a language for talking about an image and what makes it 'speak' to him and to us as the readers:

I observed that a photograph can be the object of three practices (or of three emotions, or of three intentions): to do, to undergo, to look. The Operator is the Photographer. The Spectator is ourselves, all of us who glance through these collections of photographs– in magazines and newspapers, in books, albums and archives...And the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little eidolon emitted by the object, which I should like to call the Spectrum of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to 'spectacle' and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead.

(Barthes 1981:9)

The three practices that Barthes describes here – the doing of the operator, the undergoing of the Spectrum and the looking of the spectator – provide a frame for analysing the appearance of truth in an image. Of particular interest to Barthes is the interaction between the Spectator and the Spectrum, both roles being emotionally accessible to him. Of equal interest to me, given the historical context of the images I wish to analyse, is the role of the operator, the person taking the photograph, and the way in which they choose to frame and develop an image (particularly non digital images) in relationship with the Spectrum. The dialogue that occurs between the operator and the spectator in reading the meaning of the image as text is a significant issue. I will return to this 'relational network' (Hirsch 1997:3) shortly. For the moment I want to focus on the Spectator and the Spectrum, the subject of the photograph who speaks to the Spectator through time as a ghostly figure, as this relates to my desire to connect with the familial gaze of my grandmother Elisaveta and her haunting presence in my life.

The photograph itself, as Barthes (1981) suggests, 'is in no way animated...but it animates me' (20). Each spectator is animated to respond on a number of levels, as a citizen of the world, as an artist, writer, teacher, gardener, parent and so on, the hybridised beings that we are. The composition of a photographic image, the framing, the mood and tone are all read or appreciated in the viewing, but the meaning that is gained in terms of what the image might communicate relates directly to the position of the spectator. In the case of a family photograph, such as the one of my unknown grandmother, my response as the spectator is deeply personal, familial, psychological and metaphysical. There is a desire to experience an ancestral connection, to recognise something of myself in the other. For Barthes, the photograph that most influenced his reflections on Photography was an image of his

mother as a five year old girl standing with her brother in the winter garden of the family home, which caused him to look again and again in acute recognition. It is in this photo, from all the other photos he has, that Barthes believes the true essence of his mother is captured. He sees in the child the frail old woman he had nursed, 'she had become my little girl' (72). Barthes' grief over the loss of his mother is palpable in his analysis of this photograph, which to him delivers the 'impossible science of the unique being' (71). In this very personal instance, the photograph has the potential to say about a person what much speculation and analysis of their actions might not achieve, for the spectator has united with the spectrum through 'a sort of umbilical cord (that) links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze' (81). Barthes uses the photograph as a means of emotionally connecting with his dead mother.

While Barthes' reflections on photography are deeply personal and subjective, he provides a way of thinking that furthers our understanding of how images can create meaning. The Spectrum of the photograph is an active agent in the construction of the image, whether consciously or unconsciously; the 'eidolon' they emit, continues to communicate long after the image is taken. Barthes reflects on the self-consciousness of the subject, the person who is being captured on film. In portraiture, the subject knows they are being photographed and are complicit in the act, striking a pose that they think will represent them in a particular way. To Barthes, the experience of being photographed involves a 'sensation of in-authenticity' as the subject is objectified by the fetishism of the camera (Barthes 1981:84).

The Operator and the image

The relationship between the Spectrum and the Operator impacts on the meaning communicated in the image. In effect, the Operator and the Spectrum collaborate in its construction. The dialogue between the two can be an explicit or implicit collaboration, providing the Spectator with another element to consider when viewing the photograph. Who took this photograph? Was the Spectrum a willing participant? What was the relationship between the Operator and the Spectrum? What was the intention of the Operator in framing the image in this way? What was the spectrum trying to communicate in adopting this pose or expression?

While Barthes does not venture into analysing the craft of the Operator in a technical sense, the procedure adopted as well as the intentions of the Operator are critical to the final outcome of the photographic process. The photographic medium communicates through composition, spatial and technical means, so the subject is manipulated by the photographer's techniques. While the subject has agency and communicates an image of him/herself, the operator of the camera also has agency through the techniques employed with the camera and the context within which the image is created. The intention, emotion and response to the Spectrum will influence the way the operator uses light and shade, camera angle and perspective, close up or further away, with or without a decorative background. For example, an image can evoke dark ethereality if dimly lit or luminous clarity if external light is introduced into the image. A solitary figure set against a blank background can evoke melancholy or joy depending on a range of technical variables. These techniques, however, impact each Spectator according to what they bring to a reading of that image by way of association or understanding of the photographic medium and craft. The spectator's initial response to the image is influenced by not only the positioning of the subject in a particular context, or the expression on their face, but the more subtle uses of light and texture, space and direction, angle and frame, the general mood of the photograph.

Photographic art manipulates reality in an attempt to communicate a particular idea or interest. Sontag's (1977) critique of photography describes the art of photography as a display of 'bourgeois disaffection' and 'middle-class social adventurism' (54-55) where the photographer operates as if oblivious of class interests or the social and political implications of the images they capture. The art of the operator is therefore another layer of meaning that must be accounted for in the reading of family photographs, for as Sontag suggests that while 'photography is not considered an art form in itself it has the peculiar capacity to turn all its subjects into works of art' (149), which further blurs the distinction between a 'true' representation or a distorted representation of the subject.

While the artistic intentions of a photograph can often be overlooked in a private family album, such as the one Barthes examined for the essential photo of his mother, or the photographs my parents chose to take with them when they left home, the context within which the photo was taken is an important element in

determining how the artistic techniques employed contribute to the meaning of the imagetext.³⁵

The context of the photograph

Berger (1981) differentiates between personal and public photographs. Private photographs, he argues are appreciated and read in the context of a continuous narrative, 'surrounded by the meaning from which it was severed' (55). The camera contributes to the memory of the event by producing a 'memento' of life in progress. The public photograph, he argues, is separated from the meaning of the event and is taken to serve a different purpose to that of remembering what happened; it provides information or evidence, an illustration, but one which is severed from a lived experience (56). Photographs capture moments that happened, but they do not have meaning of themselves, as the context of their making, and the viewing of the Spectator, is what afford them their meaning.

The uses of photography are clearly situated in the moments of their creation, within the political, social, cultural, personal contexts they inhabit. The photograph is always situated within a narrative, in dialogue with the spectator, so the context of any photograph is essentially boundless. The spectator as 'other' engages in a deeply subjective interpretation of the image relative to their given associations and assumptions. The operator and spectrum of an image can never know how the spectator will respond to their frozen moment in time. Similarly, the Spectator can never have all the information about the context of the moment of creation and what the Operator and Spectrum intended.

In the early days of its invention, the camera promised to capture fragments of the world in order to aid memory, to document, to give meaning, to provide evidence, as 'incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened' (Sontag 1977:5) or as Barthes suggests, by providing 'a certificate of presence' (1981:87). The evidential proof of the photograph has however been challenged since the medium allows and has always had the potential for distortion, as it can be manipulated in subtle ways to serve purposes other than merely capturing what is there. For what is *there* is only what is included in the frame, which does not provide the whole picture of the

³⁵ Hirsch (1997:3) uses the term 'imagetext' based on the work of W.J.T Mitchell (1994), which demonstrates how images contain a narrative.

context of that moment in time. Photographic technology has also enabled editing and manipulation of what is actually captured in the frame, so the veracity of the photographic image cannot necessarily be assumed.

In the 1970s, John Berger alerted us to the ideological values inherent in image making, particularly in the world of publicity and advertising, and how the viewer is manipulated to read a particular message that reinforces the values of the dominant patriarchal culture; of being conditioned into viewing capitalist notions of consumption and growth at any cost, of accepting men as leaders – ‘men act’; women ‘appear’ as objects for viewing, and as facilitators of pleasure. We are, he argued, taught to think in a particular way by images that are created to tell a particular version of how we should view the world, which in turn reinforce the prevailing values of the times. Images capture a moment in time that is constructed in powerful and subtle ways (Berger 1977). Such insights are pertinent to viewing images from the past, such as my family photographs, which were constructed within a different time, place and cultural paradigm.

Distorted images

An extreme example of the distortion of images to suit an ideological or political purpose is the doctored images of Stalin’s propaganda machine in Russia in the 1930s. Photographs and posters were used to glorify the leaders, particularly Stalin, and to convince the populace, through powerful imagery, that the revolution was progressing in the right direction. Artists and photographers alike were complicit in supporting a totalitarian state, most in fear of their own lives. Stalin’s purges of those who were once close and faithful allies, and his manipulation of historical accounts, have been well documented (Fitzpatrick 1978, Figs 1987, Uldricks 2009). Many were labelled as ‘enemies of the people’ and executed. Their faces were then systematically removed from photographs (long before digital photography made it a simple process); their very existence was denied. In *The Commissar Vanishes*, King (1997) uses photographs, paintings and posters to tell the story of Stalin’s paranoid and vicious rule in Russia from 1929 to 1953. The systemic falsification of Russian history is revealed through doctored image after doctored image, each image implying the dreadful fate of the ‘erased’. The most well known of these, is a photo of Stalin walking along the banks of the Moscow-Volga canal with the Commissar of

Water Transport, Nikolai Yezhov, by his side. After Yezhov's expulsion and execution in 1940, the photo was reprinted with Yezhov no longer in the picture (King 1997:163). Trotsky met a similar fate after his falling out with Lenin, his presence simply erased from many photos (King 1997:46-51). More terrible are the examples of people's faces being scribbled over or erased in telling examples of the vandalism of books and images where defacement of the spectre is executed with a blotch of black ink. King's archive of doctored images provides a chilling visual representation of the distortions of Soviet history. It is disconcerting to look at two identical images and seek out the person who has been airbrushed out of the second version of the photograph; a looking process that is literally the search for an apparition, a hint of what was once there. The technology available at that time or lack thereof, demonstrates the involvement of significant technical and artistic skills, where the gap left by the erased person is filled in with a design that matches the surroundings. An understanding of Stalin's propaganda machine provides a different perspective for thinking about the use of photographs in life writing.

To understand the Russia that my grandmother and mother inhabited, one must also understand the significance of the visual images that populated their world, the iconography of the Socialist experiment. Sheila Fitzpatrick (1978:9) describes images that showed peasants happily photographed singing and dancing, with tables laden with food, when in reality many were starving. Images were used to persuade and convince the people of the power of the socialist state, and the reverential status of its leaders. These images created an idealised picture of a state whose rhetoric did not match its practice. Many people may not have believed what they saw, but remained silent through fear and/or ideological indoctrination. Testimonies from hundreds of Soviet citizens in *The Whisperers* (Figs 2007) demonstrate the extent to which the regime's ideology dominated the interior life of its citizens, so that: 'it was practically impossible for the individual to think or feel outside the terms defined by the public discourse of Soviet politics, and any other thoughts or emotions were likely to be felt as a "crisis of the self" demanding to be purged from the personality' (Figs 2007:xxxiv).³⁶

³⁶ Grossman's novels (2006, 2009) explore the Soviet mind providing significant insights in this regard. The thoughts of his characters mirror many of the testimonies in *The Whisperers* (Figs 2007).

It is difficult to enter that moment and the minds of those who were complicit in the process. Many people learned to live double lives, where on the surface they lived according to the Soviet mentality and concealed their inner thoughts even in their private lives (Figs 2007, Fitzpatrick 1978).

The distortion of public images clearly has implications for the way we read photographs as representations of historical truth. *Every* photograph distorts the truth to a certain extent because it does not include what is outside of the frame, or what happened the seconds before or after the image was taken. Barthes' reading of images alerts us to the subjectivities, the unspoken network of looking, inherent in what the Spectator sees, which can also distort the viewing. When the image is of a member of one's family a particular dynamic is animated. A familial look, Hirsch (1997) suggests, involves 'an engagement in a particular form of relationship, mutually constitutive, mediated by the familial gaze, but exceeding it through its subjective contingency' (11). The family is not, however, a homogenous unit within culture and society, so there is no singular approach to understanding the specificities of a family gaze.

The image of a family

The family album acts as a historical resource, a document that can be passed down from generation to generation. If the images are not annotated in some way, however, there is no way of really knowing who or what one is looking at. The photographs my mother has kept from her time in Germany, for example, are not identifiable as images of forced labourers, as POWs, as people who have survived the carnage of a protracted war. There is nothing in these images that tells us the story of who these people are or what they were experiencing. They look young and fresh and happy, arms linked in camaraderie, standing near bushes and in sun filled fields. I would never know that my mother had spent the previous night crying herself to sleep when I look at the photograph of her posing with a bicycle outside the factory in which she worked like a slave for three months when she first arrived in Germany while she waited for the farm work to begin. The narrative context is essential for understanding what these images represent.

Berger (1981) attempts to reconcile the difference between public and private photographs by suggesting that people make their own histories and tell their own

stories using photographs to create social histories. 'Such memory,' he argues 'would encompass any image of the past, however tragic, however guilty, within its own continuity. The distinction between the private and public uses of photography would be transcended. The family of man would exist' (61). In this way each personal history would inform the public history. Photographs have the potential to enrich understanding by providing fragments of a life lived that can be interpreted in the context of the social, political and cultural context of the times. For practitioners of life writing, it is an invitation to engage with visual images and attempt to penetrate deeper meanings that might inform broader public narratives. Reading images does, however, involve an act of imagination.

My grandmother, she looks

The preceding discussion provides a frame for analysing a photograph of my grandmother that has strongly influenced my perceptions of her as woman who was



an active, and, I assume, committed member of the Communist Party.

This reproduction of a photograph of my grandmother, Elisaveta Bogdanovich, is probably taken around 1938, when she was about 33 years old and is the only photograph we have of her. The photograph of my mother with her brother on her lap is identical in style to this

photograph of Elisaveta. This digital reproduction of the original photograph, that travelled from Rostov-na-Donu to Germany, and from Germany to Australia more

than half a century ago, has not been manipulated in any way to disguise the ageing of the original, evidenced by the tiny microbes of living matter that have settled into the paper producing a yellowing patina.

A larger version of this same photograph, which my mother had framed when she first arrived in Australia, has been on display in my parents' bedroom since I was a very young child. It has no evidence of yellowing, having been framed and protected from direct sunlight in a semi darkened room. Elisaveta has gazed upon her daughter and growing family throughout the years from her pride of place above my parents' bed. Its elevated position serves to accentuate the very deliberate camera angle that has the camera's eye looking up to the subject, and the subject looking down into the camera's, and hence all who may have looked into her eyes.

This image has the appearance of a formal studio photograph, with evidence of skilled work by the photographer in creating an artistic backdrop, a technique that clearly dates the photograph. The technique of 'vignetting' was used to focus attention on the subject, with the background faded to white to remove all extraneous information. In this instance, the artist has used a brush and pen to create an artistic distraction of sorts that serves to accentuate the implied camera angle, and the obscuring of her left arm accentuates the puffy sleeves of her dress and her bosom. The construction is deliberate, and the effect dramatic. The photograph is striking in its composition, with the subject positioned at a 45 degree angle to the camera, head turned left to look down into the eye of the operator and the implied viewer. The gaze is steady and confident, almost aggressive, looking through the viewer beyond the lens to an unknown audience. It is a photograph that commands respect for the subject. I gaze up at her visage and see a strong face with determined mouth, dark eyes and a steely pose. Could this photograph capture the 'essence of a unique being' in the same way that Barthes says the Winter Garden photograph of his mother does? Can we assume that the photographer has set out to represent Elisaveta in her true essence, or as he sees her, or as she wants to present herself? I can never know what that context might have been, but is there a more complex set of meanings 'emitting' from this image?

I have looked and looked at this photograph at different stages of my life, sometimes in quiet reverie when no one was watching. This is my grandmother, a woman I have never met, could never meet. That message was clear throughout my

childhood – she may still be alive somewhere in the world, but she is lost to us, perhaps behind the iron curtain. As a child I imagined this ‘curtain’ to be like the heavy velvet drapes at the cinema that parted each time the film was to begin, except that it was made of iron and could not be parted. I perceived my grandmother as being trapped behind an impenetrable veil of iron, waiting to be found.

The Elisaveta captured in this image, can only really be understood in the context of a broader narrative, as Berger has suggested, within the social, historical and political context that the photograph was taken. My impressions of Elisaveta have been formed by a limited understanding of Soviet Russia and all its complexities, together with the stories my mother has told me – her impressions, interpretations, disjointed memories, rationalisations and generalisations – from a perspective that more often than not tried to eradicate the past, deny its significance and effectively erase its impact on the future present. The overall effect was that of an enigmatic grandmother, Soviet Party member, judge in Stalin’s court, absent mother, well groomed woman, a woman who could pick up the phone and get a new pair of shoes where none were available, a woman who was feared and envied, a woman who showed little affection towards her children, a woman who supported the injustices of Stalin’s court, who would no doubt have had ‘traitors’ summarily expelled to the gulags, and who was very particular about clean surfaces, who always scrubbed the bath at the public bath house before she and her daughter could bathe. These are the stories I have been told.

I have injected this ‘true essence’ into this photograph of Elisaveta, but it has never been a satisfactory conclusion, never enough ‘truth’ about a woman who ultimately turned herself in to the authorities to protect her family. I understood this about Elisaveta even as a child. I knew I was getting selected extracts, edited highlights of my mother’s life in Russia, that the things we didn’t ‘need’ to know, the things that were too terrible for children’s ears, in fact contained the ‘true’ story that I wanted to hear. I would often stand at the end of my mother’s bed staring up at Elisaveta and wonder what sort of person she really was, trying to read into her face the answer to my uncertainties. She was like my own private Mona Lisa whose mouth and eyes told another story if only I could read its meaning. It was there at the end of my parents’ bed that I heard many of these mythological stories about

Elisaveta. I would press my mother for more detail, but was generally given the same vignettes, over and over. It was not until I was much older that I was able to interrogate these stories and ask different questions, suggest different interpretations. By the time I was the same age as Elisaveta in this photograph I knew there was a bigger story to tell, but I had no idea what it might be or how I might come closer to understanding it.

This photograph, taken in Soviet Russia, reflects something of the time and place that Elisaveta inhabited. One can only assume that the Operator knew he was taking the photograph of a woman who worked as a judge, who was well heeled and influential. One can only speculate about the demands that Elisaveta might have made on the person taking the photograph. To what extent was she an active agent in the representation of herself in this photograph? As Barthes observes:

Since every photograph is contingent (and thereby outside of meaning), Photography cannot signify (aim at generality) except by assuming a mask. It is this word which Calvino correctly uses to designate what makes a face into a product of a society and its history.

(Barthes 1981:34)

Elisaveta's 'mask' in this instance not only captures the particular styles in representation of her society, but also a mask that she consciously adopts to present herself to her world, and her fellow Party members. It is a portrait, which by its very construction is a mythological form, just like the stories my mother has told about a mother whose 'true essence' she struggles to remember, but for the ageing eidolon that this one photograph emits.

In a time where people were skilfully and sometimes clumsily erased from photographs, as King's work has shown, the role of photography in Soviet Russia is pertinent to an interpretation of this image.

Portraits of Party leaders in the Soviet Union were often treated to vignetting, a process used since the beginning of photography. Clouding the edges of the photographic print, achieved with the air brush, was particularly suited to the Stalinist hierarchy. The subjects took on an ethereal, almost god like status, quite removed from reality.

(King 1997:98)

The artist's work is always deliberate, and in the Soviet Union at this time social realist art was used very effectively by Stalin's propaganda machine; an art form that

has been examined by political historians and art historians to better understand the process of indoctrination adopted by that regime. Goldberg (1992) observed that modernist principles informed all Russian art at this time, and especially Photography, which was seen by Lenin, the recognised leader of the socialist revolution, as the people's way of capturing the truth. 'Artists decorated streets, buildings, buses, trolleys and the trains and boats that travelled through the countryside spreading the message of revolution' (Goldberg 1992). Soviet photographers, at this time, created bold abstract images in order to reflect the daring idealism of the socialist state. The practice of viewing at odd angles from above and below, of distorting perspective, and of fashioning dramatic proportions are distinctive techniques employed by Soviet artists at this time. These techniques are evident in the photograph of Elisaveta. It would seem that the 'true essence' of Elisaveta captured in this image is the public face of a woman who saw herself in the service of the state. There are however many ways of reading any photograph – each viewer brings their own knowledge and interpretations.

Barthes' assertion that the true essence of an individual can be captured in a single photograph does not allow for the many stories that each viewer brings to reading a photograph. His own deeply subjective conclusions about the Winter Garden Photograph of his mother, the girl he came to recognise as his mother, must be viewed in the context of his need to find some comfort for his grief, some deep meaning within which to locate his sense of loss and emptiness. His use of the photograph as a kind of image mantra to enable deep reflection and analysis, or 'meditations' on being and character, what he calls the 'impossible science of a unique human being' raises some interesting questions for me in relation to this photograph of my grandmother. I imagine that my mother's memory of her own mother was deeply affected by this one portrait. Her image mantra is of a mother who was cold and unavailable due to her position of power and influence. The 'essence' that was reinforced for my mother was not necessarily a true picture of her mother or her relationship with her. While the portrait verifies the existence of the human being called Elisaveta, and gives one view of what she looked like, it does not deliver the essence of the whole person and therefore challenges the truth-value of the imagetext.

In exploring the relationship between life writing and photography, Dow Adams argues that both forms provoke similar debates with respect to claims of believability as representations – a true life story/memoir/biography or a true image of a person or place or thing. He writes:

...sophisticated theorists of photography, imagery, and semiotics have repeatedly demonstrated, in a history remarkably similar to that of autobiography, that photography is equally problematic in terms of referentiality, that the old notion that photographs never lie or that photography was an objective 'naturally mechanical' process of producing reality are much more complicated than they might first appear.
(Dow Adams 1994:494)

Each 'narrative' medium employs technical devices that both reveal and conceal, and which seek to tell a story the reader/viewer finds plausible and meaningful. Narrative illusion is present in both. All narratives, whether based on a series of events or meditations on a series of images, are constructions that reflect the creator's subjectivities and intentions, designed to communicate the author's interpretation. So while the photograph of Elisaveta provides evidence of her existence, and enables the reader to participate in a more active way in the construction of a character portrait, the verisimilitude of that narrative is open to interpretation and contestation.

Barthes (1981) does not include the Winter Garden photograph so the reader cannot adjudicate its meaning in the context of the broader narrative of his reflections, further reinforcing the forcefulness of his subjectivity. He explains its absence thus: 'It exists only for me. For you it would be nothing but an indifferent picture' (73). He succeeds in liberating himself from the 'uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical' (6), and in so doing understands his loss more completely. For this reader, the omission of the photograph of his mother did not diminish the verisimilitude of the narrative, but illuminated instead the potential of such subjective approaches in penetrating deeper meanings, perhaps even a closer version of truth, or at least a more intense emotional identification with the author's intention. Barthes' subjectivity is touching and moving and the intimacy of his language diffuses the reader's subjectivities. A more critical reading of *Camera Lucida*, might suggest that Barthes conclusions about the power of one photograph to capture the essence of a person is not borne

out by a deconstruction of the photographic process, by what else we know about the many selves that one person can be in the course of a lifetime. Barthes himself acknowledges this point in explaining why he has not included the photograph, for it means only to him relative to how he has known the person and what that particular image awakened in him. Still, one might question whether any individual has a singular essence.

In searching for a more complete story of my grandmother – not the true essence of a person captured in one image, for this is impossible as I have no other image to connect it with – in trying to uncover who else she might have been beyond the social realist lens of Soviet portraiture, I am trapped for the moment in both worlds, the expressive and the critical, striving for a truth that will invariably be incomplete.

The urge to know Elisaveta is, however, powerfully felt. I look into this woman's eyes to try and understand how she might have felt about her daughter and how she might have viewed me had we ever met. What kind of *babushka* might she have been? When I look at my grandmother's face I see the continuity of generations – my mother's mouth, the shape of my daughter's face, my inherited bosom. I seek that familial connection and attempt to transcend the unconscious optics of the image to project my own meanings onto it. I project what I know and believe about my mother and myself to try to animate the woman in this image, to bring her character to life, to make Elisaveta real. Our bodies are connected at a cellular level, and through her Mona Lisa eyes so that I know her – but I don't.

15. The Silence of Stones

Ulitsa Engelsa, Rostov-na-Donu, 1933

Lena scoops up the *Kamichki* (little stones) and lets them rest for a while in the cup of her hand. She likes the feel of them nestled together, pressing against the skin of her palm. She likes the sound they make as they scrape against each other. In fact she likes everything about them. These are her favourite stones, selected carefully from a collection of many, each one chosen for its shape and colour. She has learned that the flatter and smoother stones come to rest more gently on the top of her hand as they fall from the air, and that the darker stones are easier to see when they are thrown upwards, especially if the sun is shining. The aim of the game is to capture as many of the five stones as one can on the bridge of the hand so that there are only a few left on the ground to pick up, while simultaneously throwing one stone in the air and catching it.

Lena loves playing this game with her friends, testing her skills against them, but today she has only herself to compete against. She is in training for the next competition. The other day Natasha Ivanovich had managed to pick up three stones from the ground without dropping one. She watched in admiration as Natasha deftly scooped the three together and then presented them to the airborne stone with slightly opened hand. It fell obligingly into the nest she had created for it with a merry clink. Lena loves that sound. The rules of the game allow for at least one trial run where one can throw a stone in the air and simply brush the fallen pebbles so they are grouped together ready for the next swoop. The tricky part was to keep an eye on the stone in the air and to remember exactly how the stones are arranged on the ground. Swift reflexes and skills of co-ordination were required. Lena would always pause briefly before throwing the stone and try to imprint their placement in her memory.

This is the operation she is trying to perform when she hears the voice of her father next to her. He stoops down and pinches her cheek.

‘Ah, little Lenchka, you are playing by yourself today. Are those *Kamichki* behaving?’ he laughs and continues on his way up the stairs without waiting for an answer.

Lena is relieved that he doesn't stop to talk. Generally she tries to keep out of his way if she sees or hears him coming up the stairs. She knows that her mother doesn't like her to talk to him. He often comes to visit his sister, Sasha Fyodorova, who lives in a room a floor above them.

'Just keep out of his way,' her mother tells her, 'and don't let him come into our room.'

Gregor Fyodorovich Tigay has a bad reputation in this building. Lena has heard the women whispering on the stairs.

'He's a pig. He comes into the kitchen when I am cooking and tries to sweet talk me into giving him some borsch. "It smells so good," he says in that silvery voice... "Just a small bowl with a bit of black bread," and pushes his body up against me as if this will soften me up.'

The women have lodged their complaints with her mother many times.

One time her mother shooed her inside, but Lena could hear what they were saying because they were all talking loudly and angrily.

'This time he has gone too far. You have to do something, Elisaveta Solomonova. We don't feel safe with him here.'

'If Sasha Fyodorova hadn't come in, I don't know what he might have done to me.'

'What can I do? We are divorced. I can't control his actions.'

'They should throw him in prison and see who he rubs up against in there,' one woman hissed.

'Excuse me, but I must go to a meeting.' Her mother looked upset when she came back into the room and closed the door.

'When her mother goes to her office in the centre of town or to meetings, Lena understands that this is part of the sacrifice that she has to make. Her mother does not belong to her. She belongs to the Party. Sometimes she visits her mother in the office. She has a large desk and a big swivel chair. Lena loves to twirl in it and also spin Victor around. He always squeals with excitement and never wants her to stop.

Sometimes Lena is frightened by the people who sleep on the stairs, because they look dirty and sad and hungry. She doesn't understand why they don't have anywhere to live. The apartment she, her mother and step-father live in is really only one large room that is divided by cupboards, and sheets of cloth. Her bed is just

inside the door, behind a grey blanket, which she pushes to one side when she wants to crawl into it. She can hear her parents whisper to each other on the other side of the cupboard. Sometimes they sit at the table and listen to the radiogram or read their books. At times she can hear their bed squeak when their sleep is restless and they groan uncomfortably. Mostly she has learned to drift into sleep in her little cocoon.

Lena is intent on her training program. Today she will master the skill of picking up all the stones from the ground at once, while one is still in the air. She will do this systematically, first one, then two, then three and finally maybe even the grand number of four. She has mastered one stone easily, but two and three require more practice. So intent is she on this schedule that she doesn't notice Gregory Fyodorovich coming back down the stairs. She has just assembled three pebbles to scoop up after the next throw, her mind focused on their position. She propels the stone into the air above and is about to swoop when his large hand catches hers and pulls at her arm. His hand squeezes hers tightly and she can feel the wrench in her arm socket as he pulls her to her feet.

'Come with Papa,' he says. 'Aunty Sasha has something to show you.'

Lena has never thought of him as her father; her stepfather Pavel has lived with her and her mother since she was three years old. It is he who has been her 'Papa' for the past five or so years, but she does not resist this other father's order. He is a man, and a comrade who must be obeyed. He drags her up the stairs to the next level and pushes open the door to the toilet, and shoves her towards the seat, closing the door behind him. The smell of stale urine and excrement catches at the back of her throat. She screams when she feels his arms grabbing her around the waist and lifting her off her feet and up into the air. He lowers her feet down onto the toilet seat spreading her legs so that she straddles the bowl. She screams again and calls for her mother, but his hand clamps her mouth shut.

Gregor is struggling to undo the buttons on his trousers with his free hand; his other arm is jammed against her chest. Lena is terrified of slipping into the bowl and being sucked down into the sewers. His forearm is now pressing against her throat pushing her back towards the wall. He thrusts his hand up her dress and tears at her underwear. She can feel the fabric giving in and ripping away from her body. His hand releases from her mouth as he fumbles to extract his weapon. She screams out

again. He thrusts his whole body at her and she can feel a sharp stab of pain. She is being smothered by his chest; she can smell the smoke in his clothes and the panting of his breath makes her feel as if she is being swallowed up by a wild animal. A howl comes from a place deep inside her and fills the room.

‘Mama, Mama,’ she screams as loud as she can, and tries to push him away.

Gregor pulls away from her, turns, and slams the door behind him. She can hear his retreating steps down the stairs.

Lena runs out of the toilet, tears streaming down her face. Her mother appears at the top of the stairs panting heavily.

‘What’s the matter? What’s happened?’

‘He was hurting me,’ she manages to say between gasping sobs.

‘Who was hurting you?’

‘Gregor Fyodorovich took me in the toilet.’

‘The swine,’ her mother hisses under her breath.

She takes Lena’s hand and leads her down to their room.

‘We must go to the doctor first.’ Elisaveta rests her hands on her daughter’s shoulder as if trying to steady herself.

Lena is not sure if her mother is angry with her or not. Elisaveta straightens and takes Lena’s coat off the hook and dresses her as she did when she was a young child. Elisaveta tugs at Lena’s plaits and brushes the hair from her face. She takes out a handkerchief and dabs at Lena’s tears, her breasts are heaving heavily as if she can’t get enough air into her lungs. Elisaveta puts on her own coat, and checks her hair in the mirror.

Perhaps she should have run inside as soon as he passed her on the stairs. If she had listened to her mother and stayed out of his way, maybe this would not have happened. She is trying to replay the events in her mind. The stones had taken her into another world. She hadn’t been thinking properly. She should have run inside, but how was she to know what he was going to do.

‘We will take the tram to the doctor’s office,’ Elisaveta announces, taking Lena by the hand again.

The smell of Gregor seems to be hovering in the hallway. Lena’s body is still trembling and the pain between her legs is getting stronger. She doesn’t say

anything to her mother. They walk out onto the street, cross Lermontovska Street and walk slowly down to the tram stop.

Melbourne, June 2008

This afternoon we have tackled the difficult subject of Gregory Tigay's attack on her. It was an excruciatingly difficult topic to discuss. Although she had told me about this incident, some years ago, my mother was never willing or able to talk about the details of what happened, and I had never pressed the issue. It was one of those secrets of hers that she wanted no one else to know about. She was too embarrassed to let her sons know. She saw the event as shameful, to be connected by blood to such a person. This afternoon's conversation was the first time that my mother had talked openly about the experience, describing the event without using euphemisms such as 'he interfered with me' to allude to the sexually violent nature of the act.

On the drive home from Moe I was filled with doubts about whether I should include the story in this project. Did I have the right to reveal this, my mother's darkest secret, to unknown others? The ethics of life writing goes beyond the commitment to tell a true story; there are other considerations in determining what to tell and what to leave out. The whole story, after all, can never be told. Will it add to our understanding of Lena and Elisaveta? Will it provide an insight into the veil of mystery that has shrouded my mother's life in Russia? Will it illuminate her attitude towards her hometown and Russia? These are the questions I struggled with on the way home. Does the world need to know that my mother was the victim of such a crime?

I ring my mother as soon as I arrive home.

'Why are you ringing? What's happened?'

'I was thinking about what you were telling me this afternoon all the way home. I can't believe that no one talked to you about this incident.'

'No, nobody said nothing. Mama took me to the doctor. He said I was okay. You know the skin was not broken just a bit of bruising. She didn't even ask me exactly what he did. You don't talk about things like that.'

'Well it's just terrible that you had to go through that without any counselling or anything. You were just a child. You must have been so scared.'

‘It was never mentioned again. Mama made sure he went to jail. We got a new apartment. That was it.’

‘I was thinking about what you said about Pavel, and how he never showed you any affection. He never cuddled you the way he did Victor.’

‘Oh yes, he was so affectionate to Victor. This was his son. He adored Victor. I was just the babysitter.’

‘Well, that’s the thing. Pavel knew what happened to you with Gregory. He would have known how scared you must have been even if they didn’t talk about it to you. He would have been very careful around you.’

‘That’s right. I was scared of all men. I didn’t want to stay there by myself with him once Mama had gone. That’s why I left. That’s why I went to Germany...’ her voice trails off, as if it’s the first time she has connected the two events.

‘So you were scared of Pavel?’

‘I was scared of *all* men,’ she repeats.

‘Well, that’s what I was thinking. Pavel would have sensed that. He would have known that you were nervous about men touching you so he would have been really careful around you.’

‘Oh Lizzie,’ she giggles, ‘you’re such a psychologist! How do you think of all these things?’

‘It’s obvious to me, from everything that you have said about him, that Pavel was a good man. He adopted you legally and gave you his name. He got you tickets for the theatre all the time, took you to the circus and the market, bought you a nice coat to go to Germany with...’

‘He gave me a thousand rubles. That was a lot of money then. He told me to take my mother’s coat as well because it was warmer than the one we could get at the market.’

‘I think he must have cared about you a lot. He knew you as a toddler. You were still a baby when he came to live with you. Think about it. He had to love you.’

‘You’re making me cry.’ I can hear the tears in her voice.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t want to upset you...’

‘No, they are good tears. Happy tears. Maybe he did love me. When I was in hospital, after the accident, I told you about the accident didn’t I?’ She is talking through gulps of air.

‘Well I was very badly hurt. I had bandages all over me and I couldn’t speak. Pavel came to see me and he brought me flowers. I could see then that he was very worried. He was upset when he saw how badly hurt I was.’

‘How old were you then?’

‘Fourteen, maybe fifteen. I came out onto the street and a truck came by quickly, my skirt flew up and got caught on the hook at the end of the tray. I was dragged along the ground for quite a way before the truck stopped. The street was made from stones. What you call them, like you have in your garden.’

‘Bluestones.’

‘Bluestones, yes, I was very badly hurt. I could have died. It took me a long time to recover. I couldn’t hear through one ear for a year. It was very bad.’

‘That sounds really serious.’

‘Anyway... I’m alive now. This is costing you money. You know everything about me now.’

‘The whole point of this exercise is to think differently about your childhood. You have only remembered the bad things that happened and so you haven’t remembered some of the good things. You were so young when you left home. I just want you to feel better about that part of your life.’

‘I know darling,’ she says. ‘I had a good life really, compared to many other people. It’s good to know that my mother and father did love me. He was my real father.’

My mother has instantaneously accepted my interpretation as fact. It is the new story she will tell herself.

A few weeks later my sister-in-law Kange, Henry’s wife, tells me that my mother has recounted the incident with Gregory Tigay and revealed the fact that she is Jewish. Kange is amazed that my mother has revealed these two secrets to her and Melanie after so many years.

When I speak to my mother again, I tell her about my conversation with Kange and how pleased they were to be taken into her confidence.

‘I decided to tell them. They should know who I am and what happened to me. I never told Henry. I should have. It affected me my whole life.’

‘It wasn’t your fault.’

‘No. It wasn’t my fault,’ she agrees, gulping in air. She exhales deeply, as if letting go of the shame and fear.

‘That’s something you can never forget,’ she concludes. ‘Never.’

16. Missing Persons

Melbourne, April 2008

Two letters from Germany arrived today, both with 'Air Post' stamps. My daughter Emily is excited; she is hovering at my shoulder, waiting expectantly, her breath warming my cheek while I examine each envelope. One is from the organisation in Germany that pays my mother her war and widow's pensions. The other is from the ITS in Bad Arolsen, Germany: the International Tracing Service that specialises in finding missing persons, including survivors of World War II – the war that provided an opaque backdrop to my childhood.

When I was in Grade Four we were asked to write a story for homework.

'Imagine that you have met a famous person. Write a story about what it felt like, what you talked about, what the person looked like, anything you can imagine,' Sister Vienna had instructed.

I walked home that afternoon, trying to imagine what it would be like to meet a famous person. I had never met anyone who was famous. The Queen had been cited as an example. I could say I met the Queen in 1954, when she came to Yallourn. I caught a glimpse of her from my father's shoulders. I was two years old at the time and could only remember what my mother said had happened. I could certainly turn that into some kind of story. The cheering crowd, the pomp and glory of the procession, all could be imagined and described. I wasn't inspired by that idea, and resented the imposition of this story topic on my limited life experience. What did I know about fame? I started to question the whole concept of the word 'famous'. What does it mean to be famous? Is it to act in a way that impresses people or makes a difference to people's lives? Or is it to do something really good? Being well-known was surely not the only measure of fame or recognition. I resented the implied hierarchy of the word, the inferred superiority – famous, known, recognised, celebrated.

Somewhere during that fifteen-minute walk, I decided to write about the war. My father would be the hero of my story. I would make him famous. I thought he should be famous, because despite everything that happened to him during the war he believed in forgiveness. He taught me not to hate; not to hate the Germans for what they did, or the Russians, or the Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians or anyone who fought

in the war. He taught me the meaning of forgiveness. He encouraged me to defend Beatrice, a German girl, who was teased by the other children at our school.

‘It’s not her fault that Hitler did what he did,’ he had insisted. ‘She is just a child.’

When my father spoke like this I would hang on his every word. He understood how things are in the world. He was my life teacher.

‘In wartime,’ he had said, many times, ‘people do all sorts of things they wouldn’t normally do. They do it because they are scared, because they think they should or someone tells them to do it.’

Sunday morning was the only time I could make an appointment with him where I knew I could get uninterrupted time to interview him for my story. Equipped with pen and paper, I sat on the edge of my parents’ bed and took notes as he answered my questions.

At that stage I was still speaking to my parents in Polish, and I had to translate his Polish words into English.

I asked him to tell me about the war and what happened to him in the German prison camp. He told me about the horrific conditions in the camp, how they were always cold in winter; how there was not enough food; how they ate watery and tasteless soup made from potato peel and vegetable scraps; how people got sick and died; and how one man had lost so much weight that he could wrap his skin around himself like a blanket (this made a huge impression on me and lingers to this day), while another lost all his hair. He described how many of the prisoners were too weak to dig graves for the dead, so they were told to dig larger graves to accommodate those who died in the course of the digging. Many died from despair. They simply did not have the will to deal with the hunger, pain and suffering. I scribbled furiously, trying to capture the taste and smells of the camp. And then, as if he had to end his grim tales with a seed of hope, he told me the story that he said saved his life; that enabled him to believe in humanity again and to go on living.

‘We were coming back from digging graves, I could hardly walk I was so weak. I had no strength. I thought I was the next to go. I knew that if I fell down I would be beaten and never get up. But I couldn’t go on anymore. I slipped. It was very muddy. I was on my knees. I looked up and there, sitting at the window on the second floor of the building, was a German soldier eating his breakfast. He looked down at me. I looked up at him. We looked at each other. And then he threw a piece of bread

down onto the ground. I ate it, this small piece of black bread. It was nothing, not enough food to make a difference to my stomach, but it was enough. It was enough to make me stand up. You know this soldier helped me to go on living. He didn't have a lot of food himself, but he didn't want to see people suffering. He had to do what he was doing. He was a soldier. It was war.'

My father's eyes glistened as he told this story. He wanted me to understand.

'There are good people and bad people everywhere,' he said. 'This soldier was a good man.'

At the end of our interview my father stressed that he didn't hate all Germans, he hated the war. This was the story I wrote for my Grade Four composition. The story Sister Vienna asked me to read out to the whole school, class by class. She pinned it on the back wall of our classroom and left it there for all to read. It made my dad famous at St Kieran's primary school in 1961.

Despite my father's lessons I have inherited a conflicted relationship with Germany. The word *Niemcy* (Germans) carried a different kind of judgment to *Zydzie* (Jews); we learned to regard both as the undesirable *other*. We grew up with fragments of the story; sanitised tales, carefully edited to convey the dreadfulness of war but not the full horror, never the full story. My mother didn't know what had happened to her family. All her efforts to find them after the war had drawn a blank. Letters to her home address had been returned with the words: 'Not at this address.' I had conducted several searches through the Red Cross Tracing Service over the years, on my mother's behalf. Each individual required their own application. No record of Elisaveta Bogdanowicz, no record of Victor Bogdanowicz, no record of Pavel Bogdanowicz – only Helena, my mother, appears to have survived.

ITS in Bad Arolsen was a last-ditch attempt on my part. I had trawled through the Yad Vashem databases and other sites that listed names of the dead. No Bogdanowicz, no Nodel (my grandmother's maiden name). I had been told that more information had become available on new databases in Germany, that it was possible the German war records might produce an answer to our questions. I was advised to use every spelling of Bogdanowicz – Russian (vich), Polish (wicz) and German (witsch). I had made the tracing request in late December 2007, so it was a surprise to see this letter now.

The letter from Bad Arolsen is the one I open first. I read it. I read it again. I am amazed, excited, disappointed, surprised and frightened, all at the same time. My body is trembling; there is news, there is a past, it is real. These names that have been silently waiting in the wings of my history are suddenly here on the page, in an 'official' letter. They did exist. My mother does have a past, even if she tried to erase it.

Search for your grandmother, Mrs. Elizaveta Bogdanowicz/Bogdanowitsch

Dear Mrs. Suda

We learned of this tracing case for the first time in 1966, when the Tracing Service of the German Red Cross in Hamburg lodged an enquiry here. The actual enquirer was the son of the sought person, Mr. Wiktor BOGDANOWITSCH, with the alliance of the societies of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent in the USSR acting as mediator.

To our regret, we advise you today that a check of our documentation for any mention of your grandmother has proved negative.

Since we do not know of any place in Germany where she was staying at the time, we do not have any clue for initiating specific investigations and must close this file unfortunately.

No record of Elisaveta. Not surprising really. My research has led me to the activities of the *Einsatzgruppen*, Hitler's killing squads, whose brief was to eliminate the Jews. *Einsatzgruppen D* was very active in the areas around and in Rostov-na-Donu at about the same time my mother says Elisaveta was taken to the work camp. While the commandos kept extraordinarily detailed reports, which are now housed in an archive in Hamburg, not all have survived. The lists for *Einsatzgruppen D* are unavailable. 'We do not know of any place in Germany where she was staying at the time.' Did they search the lists from the death camps – Auschwitz, Birkenau and Treblinka? They don't say. Elisaveta's identity card, her case of clothes, and the photos she might have taken, are lost to history. I had half hoped there might be confirmation of this fact to provide closure to her haunting absence.

I feel such warmth emanating from the signatory of the letter, Margret, who chose to use the words 'unfortunately' and 'regret'. She knows that it still matters. I wonder if she realises how important the words 'the son of the sought person,

Wiktor Bogdanowitsch' are to me. These are the words that have sent me into a spin. Victor was alive in 1966. He survived the war and was still in Russia in 1966, a 31-year-old man, wondering once again what had happened to his mother. What was happening to Victor in 1966 to make him launch this enquiry again? What did he remember, what had been his experience? What happened to Victor and his father after his sister went to Germany? Suddenly, a past that had seemed like a hollow question mark becomes a full-bodied enquiry. I want to know everything about Victor.

My euphoria deflates when I realise he may no longer be alive at the age of 72. Conditions in Russia are difficult. He might be an alcoholic.³⁷ Perhaps he has family, a daughter he has named after his mother, just as his sister did. My head feels like a dissonant tune full of questions and images, imagining the past, projecting into the future, but unable to find a melody to hold on to.

I call my mother on the phone. She seems a long way away, her voice weak on the other end of the line. My mother loves life, she wants so much to live it, but her body tells her she must do so more slowly and cautiously. She is much less robust than she was even a year ago and finds it harder to focus. I need to be careful how I broach the subject with her.

'I got a letter from the International Tracing Service today.'

'Oh, yes, what's this?'

I read her the letter. She asks me to repeat a few words here and there. She tells me she hasn't got used to her hearing aids yet, and that Mary at bingo has the same problem. I am used to this meandering style of conversation with her now. I get a rundown of the lunch menu, and a critique of the coffee in the café, before she asks,

'So, they haven't found anything?'

'No record of Elisaveta, but Victor made a request in 1966. From Russia.'

'Victor, my brother?'

'Yes, he might still be alive in Russia, today.'

'He's a stranger to me now. It's more than 60 years ago. He was just a child. He was only seven. I don't know if I feel anything for him.'

³⁷ A 2006 article in *Pravda* listed 7 million alcoholics, with the real figure expected to be much higher. <http://english.pravda.ru/society/stories/09-11-2006/85432-alcoholism-0/>. Alcoholism is considered to be significant health risk for Russian men, and is seen as the cause for their low life expectancy according to World Health Organisation statistics.

She says it so bluntly and peremptorily that I am caught unawares.

I hadn't expected this response, but I know it's only part of the story, that her feelings for Victor are connected to other parts of her life that she doesn't want to revisit, the closed room. She has learned to live without. It is I who wants to revisit the story, to write it, understand it, fill out and colour in the black and white sketches of her childhood that she has felt safe to tell. Still, her ambivalence is puzzling.

My mother likes happy endings. She hates films or books that don't have happy endings. She likes her stories tied up neatly with a happy resolved ending, except for this story, her own, which doesn't have an ending. It is an unresolved tragedy without an end, so she has created one, an ending of sorts: 'It doesn't matter anymore.'

She is more concerned with the day-to-day, and begins to tell me about her doctor's appointment which segues to a story about who she met there.

'So, did they say where Victor lives, do they know that?' she asks suddenly from her fog of diversions.

'They didn't say. They just said he made a request in 1966, from Russia.'

'1966, he would have been 31. His birthday is May, so he will be 73 soon. He *could* still be alive.'

'Do you want me to try and find out where he is?'

'I don't know how I would communicate with him. My Russian is so poor now.'

'I'm sure we could find a way to do that. I'm surprised that you aren't more excited about this news.'

'What should I be excited about? I don't feel anything. I'm too old for this,' she says, and sighs heavily. I am sorry I pressed her. I should know better. I understand how she deals with her grief but I can also hear fear in her voice.

'You don't have to do anything. I'll send an email, make a few enquiries. It will all take time.'

'I'd be interested to know what happened after I left, to Victor and Pavel. What happened to our house, our things... my things.'

This is as much memory as she can manage. She changes the subject again and starts talking about one of my nieces. I wonder what 'things' she associates with the Lena she was in Rostov-na-Donu, but this is not the time for such a conversation.

A few minutes later she sighs heavily and, unrelated to what we have just been talking about, says,

‘That’s just what happens in war.’

It is her slogan; it’s her explanation for everything that is painful to think about during that period of her life.

I call her back the next day to see how she is.

‘I don’t know. I don’t feel so much for him. He was a spoilt brat. He got everything he wanted. He used to tear around on his bike and I had to chase after him. All my friends were going to the pictures and ice-skating, and I had to look after Victor. I had to stay home, and look after my brother, while my mother worked, or went to the theatre. I don’t remember feeling very much for him at all.’

She is sounding like a resentful sixteen-year-old. I have heard this tone with my own daughters. She is sixteen again, remembering Victor as a child. She doesn’t want to go back to Rostov-na-Donu. I have heard some of this before, but not about the bike, not with the teenage hostility so close to the surface. She has used her resentment of the babysitter role as an explanation for why she agreed to go to Germany to work as slave labour. She was no more than a child herself, wanting excitement and adventure. She appears unable to analyse her own behaviour. The stories she tells are based on the memory and experience of an adolescent.

I know that she was fond of Victor. We have talked about him before. She was very protective of him. We have talked about her childhood, but she doesn’t like to spend too much time there. I press on.

‘I’m sure you did care about him. You took three photos of him with you to Germany, but only one photo of your mother.’

‘Well, you know, we didn’t have so many photos.’

‘But you told me you had new prints done of Victor’s photo in Germany.’

‘Oh, yes, he looked very smart in that sailor suit didn’t he?’

‘And there’s the photo of him as a baby, only four months old or something, with his father, your stepfather.’

‘He was a very handsome man wasn’t he? Victor looked like him.’

‘And the photo of you and Victor, you have your arms around him.’

‘The photographer told us to sit like that.’

She is softening a little. I can feel her drifting into memory. Perhaps into happier memories of her little brother, stories of love and attachment, memories of the garden, the smell of a little boy nestled in her lap.

‘That photo of us two together was taken at the same time as the one of my mother. We didn’t have many photos. Not like today, you didn’t just *snap, snap, snap*. We got dressed up and had good photos taken in the studio.’

I encourage her to talk to her friend Luba, who is also Russian and like my mother married a Polish man when she was in Germany. Luba maintains contact with her extended family in Russia and has visited there several times. She weeps openly when she talks about her life in Novorossiysk; she keeps the memory close to the surface, celebrates her joys and laments her sorrows. She is still Russian. She speaks the language, reads Russian magazines, watches Russian films and cable TV news, and generally immerses herself in the culture.

Luba has been pressing my mother to recognise her Russian origins, to be proud of her culture. She is the only person in the Polish community who knows the truth about my mother’s life. My mother has entrusted her with what she considers to be her deepest secrets. Luba understands my mother’s fears, but chides her for keeping her true identity secret.

‘You should be proud to be Jewish. The Jews have contributed much to the world.’

Lena is not convinced the Polish community would be as accepting as Luba.

When I speak to her next I ask her if she has spoken to Luba.

‘Yes, I told her about it,’ she says, somewhat sheepishly.

‘And what did she say?’

‘He’s your *braddar*.’

The inflection is entirely Luba’s.

We are used to waiting. The last time we made a request through the Red Cross months passed before there was any reply. The email, just weeks later, from Margret Schlenke is a welcome surprise.

Cordial thanks for the statements you made in your mail of April 3, 2008.
They have touched us exceedingly since the inquiry initiated with our office,

has made it a certainty for you and your mother that your brother/uncle Mr Wiktor BOGDANOWITSCH, who had gone missing, survived the war.

Margret goes on to explain the process they will undertake to try to locate my uncle. I am moved by Ms. Schlenke's empathy and want to share it with my mother, so I call her immediately. Her voice seems a little lighter than the last time we spoke. I read the email to her and explain what it means. Despite the usual meandering I notice a change in her attitude; she seems more focused on what I am saying, she has opened the door.

'Well, we might have to go to Russia after all... to see Victor!' she sounds like an excited schoolgirl. I haven't heard this lightness for many years, not since my brother passed away.

'I'll sell the house and we can all go to Russia,' she laughs.

I catch my breath. This woman, who has steadfastly refused any suggestion of returning to her homeland, is now joking (I assume) about selling her only asset to see the spoiled brat for who she says she doesn't feel 'so much'.

'I don't think you need to sell the house, but we will go if he is there. Would you be able to do the flight to Europe?'

'To see Victor? Yes of course I could do it. We could stop over and break up the trip.'

She has already planned it. It has obviously been on her mind these last weeks. I can't believe I am hearing her say these words.

'It would be good to know what happened to my family,' she says, with a deep sigh, almost of relief, tinged with excitement.

The frisson I experience is filled with conflicting emotions. I am trying to understand what she must be feeling, the mixture of fear and excitement, dread that he may no longer be alive, regret at lost memories, loss of her childhood self, and elation at the possibility of reopening the door to Rostov-na-Donu and the life she lived there. I know my mother well, but she continues to surprise me with the complexity of her emotions. Her resilience is unfathomable. Her joie de vivre in the face of adversity has inspired me on many occasions, but her enigmatic response to this development has floored me.

'Did you give them our last address?'

'Yes, Buddonovsky Prospect, Rostov-na-Donu.'

‘111, on the corner of Lermontovska.’

She says ‘our’ address. She’s catching the tram with Victor. She’s reminding him of the address. I can feel it. It’s exactly what she did when I was a child, when she made me memorise our address in Yallourn, in case we were separated during outings. ‘111 Buddonovsky Prospect’ is engraved in her memory.

It’s difficult to imagine what it might mean to find one’s brother, after what is essentially a lifetime. I wonder what connection they might feel, whether shared blood can compensate for the passage of time. We send all the relevant documentation and permissions to the Tracing Service and wait again, living our lives in the present, with a faint sense of urgency humming in the cellar.

I write to Margret Schlenke again, gently enquiring about their investigations. She replies a few weeks later and tells me that Victor’s last known address was Petropavlovsk, in Kazakhstan but the resident’s registration office does not hold any information regarding his whereabouts. She assures me that investigations are continuing and that we must be patient.

Every piece of information about Victor provides another avenue for investigation. I type ‘Petropavlovsk’ into Google Maps – it is at least 2000 kilometres from Rostov-na-Donu. The history books tell us that many Russians fled east to Kazakhstan to escape the war. Perhaps, we think, Victor and his father Pavel escaped there after Lena left Rostov. Perhaps they both survived. Informed speculation is all we have. The prospect of finding two people in a country the size of Russia, which has been separated from the rest of Europe for centuries and then shrouded by an invisible iron curtain during the Cold War, seems daunting. We have to be patient, and hope.

Another six months goes by: my eldest child moves to Sydney; the younger travels to Europe with a rock and roll band; and I move house with my new partner in life, David. Google, Facebook and Skype provide us with an instant connection with each other, and the world, and still the past sits quietly in the corner, waiting to be found. I write to Margret Schlenke again to notify her of my change of address. A member of the ITS team responds on May 25th, 2009, with details of their investigations in Russia and Germany. Their latest attempt ‘by today’s mail’ is to lodge a tracing request with The Magen David Adom organisation in Israel. Many

Russian Jews emigrated to Israel in the 1990s, after the fall of the wall in Berlin, so they are pursuing that avenue.

I am heartened by their persistence, but we appear to have exhausted all avenues. The Jewish connection seems like a long shot. I recall one of my students, a former Russian soldier, telling me that the Russian secret service could find anyone in Russia.

‘They could find him *if* they wanted to,’ he had said, punctuating his words with a shrug, eyes raised heaven ward, and an expression on his face that said ‘Don’t hold your breath.’

Thursday night, the 4th June, 2009, at 10.45, I find the following email in my inbox:

Dear Mrs. Suda,

With great pleasure, we would like to inform your mother and you that, with assistance of our colleagues at Magen David Adom, Tracing Service in Israel, we were able to find out that Mr Viktor BOGDANOVITCH is living in Moscow. In today’s E-mail which we received from Israel it said:

“I am pleased to inform you that we have traced Victor BOGDANOVITCH who is still alive and living in Moscow. His telephone number is 7495 6xxx006. I have just spoken to his son Arkady Bogdanovitch who lives here in Israel. I confirmed that his father is the son of Pavel and Elisaveta Bogdanovitch. His cell phone number is 972xxx63 x902 and his email is arkadyxx@xxxav.co.il. He was very overwhelmed at the news that his aunt is still alive in Australia and was going to phone his father immediately to give him the good news. Please pass on the information as quickly as possible to Viktor’s sister Helena and to her daughter Mrs. Elizabeth Suda in Australia.”

Remains for us to say that that we are very happy that we, together with our colleagues in Israel, were able to bring this tracing matter to a positive end.

Best wishes and all the best.

Adina Horn, as well as the entire tracing team, in Bad Arolsen.

The sense of jubilation is evident; one missing person found after 67 years. The Germans at Bad Arolsen, together with their Jewish colleagues in Israel, have reprised their own resurrection from the ashes of the Holocaust. From the moment they reported on the documentation that showed Viktor was alive in Petropavlovsk

in Kazakstan in 1966, and making enquiries about his mother, their commitment to the search was evident.

My mother was not prepared to believe her brother might still be alive in 2009. 'My brother survived the war,' she announced, as if the words were delicious morsels in her mouth, but she did not dare to hope for too much. The morsels began to sour when there was no further news of his whereabouts.

Now we have proof, a name, a phone number, and an email address. I am overwhelmed, and the trembling in my body is uncontrollable but focused. I feel I must ring to tell her, even though it is so late. Her voice is deep and croaky. She was asleep. I can hear her struggling to come into wakefulness. I feel some guilt at disturbing her, as she often finds sleep elusive.

'Mum, I just thought I should tell you now, I just got an email saying Viktor is alive, and living in Moscow.'

'Oh,' she says, barely registering.

I know she's half asleep, but I read the email to her.

'Oh. I don't know what to say.'

I bring the conversation to an end, slightly regretful of waking her.

I know my mother a little better now, after our long conversations throughout the course of this project. I have seen how she deals with shock, and grief, but never miraculous, joyous news. I have seen the steely mask of denial, the camouflage for inconsolable grief, the coquettish social graces, the second skin that seems to contain her emotion in a clearly labelled compartment that reads 'Don't go there'. I wonder how she will deal with this. I try to picture her waking up in the morning and remembering my phone call. Will she think about the little boy who is now a man?

I stumble my way through an email to Arkady in Israel, in stilted and formal language. I figure he might know some English. I know no Russian. I use simple sentences that should be easy to translate. David stands over my shoulder and laughs at my formality. 'You're supposed to be excited, not writing a business letter!' I send it and it bounces – wrong email address. I type his name into Google, and up pops a Facebook entry for Arkady Bogdanovich in Israel. I send him a message.

The next day his first email arrives with the heading:

'HERE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!'

And then:

‘Hello!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! First of all - sorry for bad english...’

The communication has begun with a flurry of exclamation marks. A list of phone numbers and email addresses for both father and son follows, with a cautionary:

“NB- He is not speak English.’
‘I spoke with him immediately after Red Cross called!!!!
Now he is checking options for flight to Australia.
ITS ABSOLUTELY FANTASTIC & UNBELIEVABLE !!!!!!!
I’m waiting for connection with impatience.
I’m too excited => sorry again for my funny English.
Be in touch!!!!’

There is no Anglo-Saxon reserve in this email – only raw emotion, unadulterated joy and incredulity. I start to imagine who these people might be. It is extraordinary that after all these years of waiting, of not knowing, the familiar *ping* of an email arriving in the inbox has changed who I am, irrevocably. A dialogue box has opened to a past I have tried many times to conjure in my imagination. What if there was someone still alive? What if they did survive? Somewhere in the world there might be an uncle and cousins.

I once asked my mother about other relatives in Russia. She revealed that her mother had two brothers and sisters; a fact I had never heard before. Another time she had mentioned taking a message to her grandmother after she moved out of their apartment.

‘All I can remember is that it smelled of garlic! We had nothing to do with these people.’

When I was younger the curtness of her responses was enough to deter me. ‘What’s the use of thinking about that?’ End of conversation. Even now, after all the gentle conversations we have had, I can experience that same indifference from her, a defensiveness that is hard to read. ‘What do you want to know about that for?’ Such responses no longer deter.

If one person survives, a new family can grow. This seems to be the mantra that sustained so many displaced people in Europe after the war. My mother and father left everything behind and started a new life in a land that knew nothing about them, who they were, what they had been through and why they could not return.

Now I am faced with the task of facilitating the reconnection between sister and brother, of communicating with a family I never thought I'd have. I am nervous about how my mother might approach such a reunion, given the erratic nature of her responses that range from exaltation to fear and uncertainty. Her Russian family belongs to a secret past; they are not part of her current identity or her sense of the words 'my family'. I am too excited to feel daunted by her possible resistance. I have an uncle, and I want to know who he is.

17. Revelations

Melbourne, October 2009

‘This is very important,’ Victor says, hunching over the papers that he is pulling out of the envelope. He shuffles through the folded documents, opening them up and then closing them again, laying them out on the table before him, like a game of patience. I have no idea what these documents are, but I stand behind Victor and Lena to see each piece as it emerges from the recycled envelope.

The conservators at the museum where I work would be horrified to see these documents managed in this way. They are frayed, yellowing and bundled together in a crumpled pile. Little effort has been made to preserve them from light damage. They have not been carefully placed between two sheets of clean paper and sealed in lightproof bags, as one must do to properly preserve old documents. Some papers are even stuck together with bits of sticky tape. Yet they are important historical documents. So important are they that Victor wants to reveal their existence immediately upon arriving at our house. He has been the custodian of these documents since childhood, conserving them in envelopes such as this, and transferring them from one place to another, from Rostov-na-Donu to Petropavlovsk in Kazakhstan, to Sverdlovsk in the Urals, to Moscow, and now to Melbourne. He has brought the family archive to Australia to show his sister what they should remember.

His sister sits beside him looking blankly at the stack of documents laid out on the table. My mother’s documents from her time in Germany are now carefully preserved in plastic bags, inside an old sweet tin that has an image of a sailboat moored in a palm filled grotto emblazoned on the lid. She has used the same tin for as long as I can remember. The symbolism of the boat and dreamy surrounds a testament to her new life in a safe haven.

I can tell my mother is struggling to process events as they unfold. She stumbles over words, asks things to be repeated, and mixes Russian, Polish and English words into her translations of Victor’s speech. I find that I can understand enough of what is being said as many of the words are similar to Polish, and with the rudimentary Russian I have acquired from my Monday night classes I realise that she is missing a lot of detail. I want so much for this reunion to work for both of them that I find

myself dancing around them, trying to capture every word, alert to any potential areas of conflict or misunderstanding.

Victor seems unperturbed, and babbles away as if the opportunity might suddenly disappear. He talks loudly and emphatically, punctuating his words with the sweeping gestures and facial expressions of a mime artist. His body is alive with ideas and memories. He darts from one topic to another. He draws us into his orbit.

Victor's gush of attention has both delighted and bewildered my mother. When he had emerged from behind the custom doors at the airport barely two hours before, he had looked crumpled, and bleary eyed, and in need of sleep and a shave. The first words he uttered to David and I were: 'Lena, where is Lena?' He had come to see Lena. He had waited a long time for this moment but was suddenly overcome with intense impatience. He rushed ahead of us in the direction I was pointing murmuring, '*Gdie, gdie? Gdie* Lena?' (Where, where? Where is Lena?)

When she appeared from the crowd with Emily, the moment of reunion was lost in a crush of skin against skin and my mother's head buried in her brother's arms. Victor, towering over my mother's diminishing frame, exclaimed:

'I remembered you as being very tall!' He thrusts his arm above her head where he imagined the top of her head to have been.

'You were just a little boy,' she laughs. 'And I'm shrinking!'

No sooner were preliminary tears and greetings over, Victor was then impatient to get out of the airport, launching forward in the direction of the exit pushing his trolley of luggage before him, almost oblivious to the procession that followed him. Once at our house he had quickly washed and shaved, changed out of his travel clothes and bounded back into the dining room with his envelope.

He has something to show us. He mutters to himself, as if aware that Lena does not fully comprehend the import of what he has before him. I wonder how often he must have studied these documents over the years. If as a child he had opened and closed them, hoping that they might magically speak to him and tell him more about his family.

'Here is the marriage certificate of Elisaveta and Pavel,' he says, flicking the paper open, and pointing to the date. 'Only ten days before I was born! But this is the second marriage. The first is still in the archive.'

He continues shuffling through the papers, frowning and muttering.

‘Here is my father’s record of work. Here you see it says he was a good worker in the shoe factory.’

He is moving too fast, wanting us to know everything at once. There are two marriage certificates? I don’t understand what he is talking about, but I understand the words ‘*v arkhivakh*’, in the archives. I make a mental note to follow up on this information. I wonder if he is referring to a civil or religious wedding, or if perhaps there were two marriages one after the other. I’m surprised that this detail has not come up in previous correspondence.

Victor and I have sent more than 100 emails between us over the past five months. We have written to each other daily, sometimes twice daily, exchanging photos, information, stories, reflections and hypotheses about the events of 1942. We have been rewriting the family history together and have come to know each other via the written word and our electronic friend Google translate, but communication in the flesh is trickier. His physical presence tells another story.

‘And here, this is the letter I told you about, from Tamara,’ he says, waving it in the air. It is written in pencil and many of the words are fading.

My mother stares at the letter from Tamara, a fellow worker in Germany, and then turns it over in her hand, as if trying to imagine her sitting down and writing the letter.

‘I don’t understand why she wrote to my old house. I don’t even remember giving her my address.’

She looks confused. Victor had sent us a digital copy of the photograph that had accompanied the letter that he received in 1951. His foster mother, Lisa, who was still living in his family’s apartment, had responded to the first letter from Tamara, confirming that Victor had survived but his sister had not returned from the labour camps. My mother could not quite believe that Tamara had returned to Russia from Germany after the war and written a letter to Rostov-na-Donu. More puzzling was the photograph that Tamara had in her possession. When I opened the file I recognised the image immediately, even though I had never seen it before, as being from the same series of photographs my mother had brought to Australia from Germany. My mother is wearing a dark coat with a fur collar, and my father is dressed in a Polish uniform. My mother was equally puzzled when she saw the photograph.

‘I remember when we took this photograph, but I don’t have this one. I only have the one of Paul by himself in his uniform. He borrowed a Polish soldier’s uniform so he could have a photo of himself as a soldier. And then we took a photo together. That’s my mother’s coat. I had it taken in, because it was too big.’

This is the coat that Pavel had insisted she take, even though it was much too big for her. I remember the photograph of my father in Polish uniform, but I hadn’t realised it was not his own uniform. In retrospect, his uniform obviously would not have survived the hellish conditions he described in the camps. There is so much I do not know. The past has become more fragmented, a mosaic of conflicting interpretations.

My mother’s memories change and fade. I am beginning to wonder if I remember her past better than she; I find myself saying ‘But you said you were good friends with Tamara’ or ‘I thought you lost your mother’s coat on the train.’ I have become the custodian of her memories, the ones she has recounted over the years and even up to a few years ago. Can I trust these old recollections, the edited clean washing stories about her past? Even the soiled, later additions are incomplete and not entirely believable.

The Tamara incident makes me wonder if her memories shift and change according to the audience. Victor’s appearance on the scene puts everything into question.

Tamara’s photograph has significance for Victor as it confirmed that his sister had survived the war. There she was standing with her handsome beau looking healthy, elegant and happy. He wanted the story and the photograph to be true. The image was taken some years after Victor had last seen his sister, so it must have provided a glimmer of hope that he might be able to find her again. He treated the letter and photograph as factual evidence. Tamara had however told Victor that she and Lena were working in Poland, not Germany. She could not afford to tell him the truth for fear she would be sent to the gulags, or worse – shot.³⁸ Victor, however, then spent fruitless years trying to find Lena in Poland through the Red Cross Tracing service.

³⁸ Stalin treated POWs, and forced labourers, as traitors who could no longer be trusted (Elliott 1973).

Tamara's letter and photograph confirm my mother's low opinion of her old friend, who once tried to win the affections of my father when there had been a lover's tiff and they had separated briefly. I am surprised at the vehemence with which my mother hisses out these words more than half a century later:

'She wasn't a true friend. She wanted Paul for herself.'

My curiosity is aroused, but I sense Victor's impatience and desist from pursuing the letter with my mother.

Victor is on to the next document. He produces a small airmail paper envelope from the pile, and pulls out a letter that is folded in four and has spots of mould outlining the yellowing edges. The writing on the pages is still legible.

'This,' he says, holding the letter up for all to see, 'is written by our mama to her brother Abram. He gave this letter to me after the war.'

Abram Nodel, Elisaveta's younger brother, had come to the orphanage just after the war to see him. Abram had wanted to take Victor home and live in the Buddonovsk apartment. Victor did not know Abram at all, and was too frightened to go with him. He also did not want to evict his guardian Lisa, who was still living in the apartment. She had replaced his father, mother and sister as his primary source of affection and care. Victor's contact with his mother's brother, and various cousins who survived, has also puzzled my mother, as prior to the war they had no contact with their extended family. Victor concurs that he didn't know the extended Nodel family as a child, but they were there at war's end and he has since been welcomed into the family. He uses the name 'Nodel' in his email address.

I can't believe that I am looking at a letter written by my grandmother, in her even Cyrillic script. It is an artefact I never imagined uncovering in the course of my search. I had hoped to find something with her name on it, some official proof of her existence, but this has exceeded my expectations. Victor reads the letter to my mother, but I can see she is not really processing what this means. She is utterly overwhelmed by Victor, by the outpourings of story, by her mother's letter to a brother, and by the mass of Russian words floating on the table before her. She is being transported to another time, another world, that was once her own, but that she had relinquished.

The information being revealed challenges the version of events she has presented as the truth. My mother believed that her mother had little or nothing to

do with her family, her mother and brothers and sisters. She knew that Elisaveta gave money to her sisters to help support her mother, but was unaware of any contact.

Elisaveta mentions 'these people' by name in her letter, as if she has just spoken to them. She writes as 'we': the Nodel family.

'I didn't know she wrote this letter to her brother. I didn't know she even saw them...' My mother's voice trails off. She seems stunned, unable to comprehend. Elisaveta writes of her daughter Lena, as a socialist activist, a young pioneer; and of Victor learning his alphabet, 'a bit spoilt but a good boy'. Victor chortles as he reads this bit.

'Yes, I was a little man in a big suit,' he laughs, referring to the photo my mother has of him, dressed in a sailor suit, which he had never seen before. The suit was much too big for him and probably would have still fitted him four years down the track. The overall effect, however, was to make him look much older than his six years.

Elisaveta writes with great concern for Abram, who has been injured at the front. She is writing on behalf of the family, her family, her mother and sisters. Elisaveta, the woman who turned her back on her Jewish background and became a loyal Party member and Soviet judge, writes with such care and compassion to her brother. She is very worried that he may have been injured, so relieved that he is still alive. It is a letter filled with familial love. It does not read like a letter from a woman estranged from her family. It does not read like the letter of a cold, hard woman.

The letter is the most tangible piece of evidence I have of my grandmother's voice, her thoughts and feelings, her character. It was written during wartime, three months before the Germans reinvaded Rostov-na-Donu, and four months before her death. They are documents I must copy, and have translated properly. Every word has meaning. Every stroke of her pen has significance. They are all we have of Elisaveta; her own words, written under duress, at a time when the future was precarious and uncertain.³⁹

³⁹ The historical context of this letter is analysed in more detail in Chapter 19 of this thesis.

Victor produces another piece of paper. It is a summary of documents held in the archives. We discover that Elisaveta was the Chairman of the Union of Soviet Judges and Prosecutors for the Rostov Region, which is also a surprise to my mother. Elisaveta's expulsion from the Party earlier that year is also a new and vital piece of information. The words on this page foreshadow the fate that awaits the Bogdanovich family in August 1942. Elisaveta had been expelled from the Party for failing to obey an official instruction to evacuate the city in November 1941, when the first attack on Rostov-na-Donu by the German army occurred. Her husband Pavel was initially spared expulsion but later succumbed to the harsh punishment of the system. Consequently, when the Germans took the city a second time in June 1942, they were not afforded the same protection as other Party officials and her fate was sealed.

Elisaveta, was ordered to evacuate in early November 1941 – she did not follow these orders arguing that her children were sick and unable to be moved. By this account Elisaveta had jeopardised her standing in the Party, and ultimately her own survival, in order to protect her children. Victor tells us the story. I am unclear whether he has reconstructed this from accounts by neighbours or the extended family, but he tells it as if it were fact. He was running a fever, and Lena was sick too. Elisaveta moved them to a village outside the city, to stay with friends, rather than where the Party wanted her to go. It is not clear where she was to be evacuated, but they had been asked to pack up their things.

My mother doesn't remember any of these events, of Victor being sick or even being sick herself. I can see her struggling with the realisation that not only can she not remember these details but also that there were also machinations that she knew nothing about. She had no idea her mother had been expelled from the Party. It is as if Victor is talking about another family, as if she was not there, as if a terrible mistake has been made and this is not her brother at all. Victor is so intensely engaged in his revelations that he seems unaware of my mother's sagging spirits.

'I remember we stayed in a village for a few days when the fighting was going on... with friends...' she ventures, but she is not sure and shakes her head.

Victor's archival revelations have taken their toll on my mother, who looks exhausted and teary. I hasten to lighten the atmosphere. We have time to return to

these matters. Victor has only been in the country for a few hours and already he has rewritten our family history.

‘I have an idea. Let’s take a photo of the brother and sister reunited!’

I run upstairs and bring down the framed photograph of my mother with her little brother, Victor. She looks at us with large doleful eyes, her lips slightly parted in the beginning of a smile. Victor is sitting in her lap holding a toy horse. He is 3 years old and Lena is 13. Her chin brushes the top of his head. He is looking into the middle distance, his eyes obviously focused on an object. I have sent Victor a digital version of this photograph, as my mother has the only copy. The style of the photograph is the same as the portrait we have of Elisaveta with the vignetting of the subject and a hand-painted ink wash creating a jagged backdrop to the portrait. There is no dramatic angle to this image.

Lena and Victor look at the photograph together and laugh at the thought of Victor sitting on my mother’s knee now. Victor has already decided on the pose they should adopt. He takes Lena by the arm and sits on a chair, perching her on his knee in the same position as in the photo taken when he was a young child sitting on his big sister’s knee. We capture the mirror image of a small elderly woman sitting on a larger man’s knee, looking straight into the camera’s eye, and smiling.

18. My Grandmother, she Smiles

Melbourne, October 2009

Victor is tapping away on a laptop computer. My mother is annoyed that her brother spends so much time in front of the computer. She is not used to this instant electronic communication that has facilitated the relationship between her brother and daughter. She is not part of the world we have created together, with the help of our friend Google Translate, even though I have printed off all the emails and their translations for her to read.

My mother and I are studying the cover of Victor's book of poetry, *Dialogue Windows*, trying to identify the faces in each of the little computer screens that adorn the front and back cover. Their family – Elisaveta, Pavel, Lena, Victor – takes pride of place as a banner at the top of the front cover. Each of them is framed in their own computer screen. The poems in the book have been written for, to, and about the people whose faces appear in the computer screens, as meditations on life, love, belonging, loss, longing, memory and hope. I have a sketchy understanding of the contents of the book as I have only read a few translations of poems Victor has sent me. One is about his experience as a child during the war, while another about his father, and yet another about his relationship with his mother. His poems are a dialogue with loved ones who are both alive and dead. My uncle is a poet who drills into his own psyche; he is driven to write, to express himself. His son Arkady, apart from being a philologist, is a musician who puts his father's poetry into song. One of those songs is called *Dusa* (Soul), with all the connotations of the Russian spirit. I am frustrated by my lack of language and subsequent inability to fully comprehend the richness of this newly discovered arm of the family.

'Victor,' I ask, in my rudimentary Russian, holding the book up and pointing to the image in question, 'where is this photo of Lena? I don't have this image.'

'I sent it to you,' he says, somewhat preoccupied, and continues typing, hunched over the computer, his brow furrowed in concentration. The letters on the keyboard are unfamiliar, and he is using an onscreen Cyrillic keyboard to guide his writing.

I guess that it must be one of the corrupted file attachments from Victor that I was unable to open, and which he was unable to rectify at his end. My mother doesn't remember the photograph either.

'You had very long plaits, and it looks like you are wearing a blouse with embroidery,' I say, squinting at the image.

'Victor,' she says, in her big sister voice. 'Stop typing and tell us when is this photo taken?'

He looks up, bemused by the scolding tone and smiles at her warmly.

'Lenochka,' he says, invoking the sweetest diminutive of her name. '*Adin minut.*' (One minute).

Finally, after fiddling away on the computer for a little longer, he beckons for us to come to see what is on his screen.

'It is taken from this photo,' he says, turning the screen slightly towards us.

My heart flutters at the sight of the family portrait filling the screen: this ghostly *trace* of the Bogdanovich family looking into our eyes through the lens of a camera, taken some seventy years ago. The sepia-toned image is creased and stained but the expressions on the subjects' faces are sharp and clear.

'Where was this photo taken?'

'It is in our lounge room,' my mother says, quietly, gingerly brushing a speck of dust from the screen with the tip of her handkerchief as if fearful she might erase this apparition.

'We have one photo where we are all together,' sighs Victor, taking hold of my mother's hand and clasping it between his own.

This portrait, taken in Rostov-na-Donu, just before the war began, suggests a more complex story of the Bogdanovich family than the one my mother has told. It presents me with an image of a family that once lived in this house, who shared this moment where they are represented as a cohesive unit. Pavel, whose right shoulder touches the left edge of the photo, and Elisaveta, whose left shoulder touches the other edge, are both seated with Victor standing between them. Victor's body is turned towards his father with his left hand resting on his father's knee, his right hidden in his father's right hand. His mouth is set in a straight line and his eyes are gazing intently into the camera. Victor is wearing the same sailor suit and the same serious expression we have seen in other photos. My mother is standing behind

Victor and between the seated couple, her head and shoulders evenly positioned between them. She too is gazing intently into the camera's eye her head slightly tilted towards her mother. Pavel is dressed in a suit and tie and is smiling kindly at the camera operator. We can see the top of a telephone behind his right shoulder and beyond its earpiece the photo of a man with grey hair and beard. It looks like Karl Marx. Every detail in this image makes the past seem more real.

The Elisaveta we see in this photo is the focus of my attention. Barthes' *punctum*, which is like a 'prick to the eye', captures my imagination. This is not like the picture that has been seared into my memory since childhood, the stern Soviet judge who looked down upon us from a distance. She is here in the room, looking at us with soft brown eyes that are warm and understanding, her body round and relaxed, leaning into her family, with her hands gently folded in her lap. My grandmother is smiling. She is smiling at me, at her daughter and her son. She fills the room with her aura, with her memory and with her truth. She was there and now she is here. Elisaveta, the mother and wife, posed for a portrait with her family in their cosy apartment. On a shelf above her head a little figurine, dressed in top hat and tails, with its right arm perched cheekily on its hip, appears to be overseeing the proceedings. I gaze into her eyes and try to hear what they have to tell me. A mellifluous hum sends a shiver down my neck.

Victor asks if we received the other photo of Elisaveta and Pavel, and we shake our heads. He brings another image up onto the screen.

'This was taken before I was born,' he says.

The photo is badly damaged, its edges torn and frayed, and the image appears washed out, as if there is too much light entering the aperture. We see a young couple reclining in the grass on a warm day. The sleeves of Pavel's shirt are rolled up and he is reclining on his elbow, with the grass in the foreground casting a pattern across his chest. Elisaveta is seated demurely in front of him, blocking a view of his legs, holding a bunch of wild daisies in one hand. The photographer must be crouched on the ground before them as he has captured the moment with a ground's eye view. What was this moment – a lover's tryst, a secret dalliance? My mother is not in this picture. She has no memory of their courtship. She never knew the Elisaveta who risked the ire of her family to be with the man she had fallen in love with at the shoe factory in Mariupol, some 200 kilometres from Rostov-na-

Donu across the Ukraine border. This fractured image evokes another time and place. I try to imagine what it might have been like to be a twenty-two-year-old Jewish woman, who already has a two-year-old daughter from a prior marriage, trying to make a new life in the heady post-revolution years, when their world was being remade and everything seemed possible. Elisaveta gazes shyly into the camera eye, with the beginnings of a smile forming on her lips. She is perhaps 23 or 24 in this photo and, to my eye, beautiful.

These new images of Elisaveta cause me to reflect again on the complexities of self. In the thirty-seven years she lived Elisaveta was a lover and then wife. She was a mother, sister, aunt, daughter, worker, friend, comrade and judge. Had she survived the war, she would have been a grandmother at forty-two, and may even have lived another forty years. We can never know who she really was, but these simulacra of my grandmother cause me to feel a little closer to the woman with the enigmatic smile.

19. Wrestling with the Truth and History: Fiction in Evidence

The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate.

(Carr 1987:12)

Historiography's promise of truth is eclipsed by the shadow of what is not known, yet the need to settle on an account that explains the course of history is very compelling. Victor's arrival on the scene was like having one of Pirandello's characters come barging onto the stage. He had his own story to tell and a fervent belief that his interpretation was the one and only truth. *He* had done the archival research and interviewed witnesses; *he* had the documents his parents left behind and the letter from his mother; *he* had lived in the Soviet Union and understood its *modus operandi*. He quite rightly presented himself as the family historian. Some of his assumptions were, however, incorrect. For example, my mother was working in Germany, not Poland; Gregory Tigay went to prison for good reason not because of the whimsy or vindictiveness of an unsympathetic judge. I wonder if perhaps the children were not sick at all and Elisaveta had lied to her superiors in order to avoid relocation. Victor was also convinced that his father was the hero of the story, and that he had cunningly sent Lena off to work somewhere else to escape the *Einsatzgruppen's* guns. My mother does not contradict this view but her story did not have Pavel as a driving force behind her decision. Victor recounts how Pavel had saved the house from being blown up by German tanks because he reasoned with the invading forces and persuaded the neighbours to remove the barricades they had been instructed to erect to block the passage of the tanks. He had cleverly co-operated with the enemy to protect his family. Victor was told that Pavel gave the keys to their apartment and some cash to a close and trusted neighbour, saying: 'Make sure Victor is looked after,' before being taken away in a black Volga, never to be heard of again. These are the stories of an orphaned child, who sought the truth as an adult. Victor confirmed that Elisaveta was the victim of the *Einsatzgruppen* 'extermination' of the Jews of Rostov-na-Donu in August 1942. This was where my

own research had also led me, although it was only a supposition based on the timing of events.⁴⁰

Victor's arrival caused me to adjust my approach in the construction of this story. For a start, I had real documents to work with from the archives in Rostov-na-Donu, actual facts and details about my mother's family, a family tree of sorts, and most importantly a letter written in my grandmother's hand, the most sought after of artefacts for a biographer/historian, and one which I never imagined I would ever find when I began this project. I had yearned for some kind of official documentation about my grandmother—an entry in a court ruling with Elisaveta's name as the presiding judge, her name on an official list from a German work camp, a date of birth, or even death—something that verified her existence in the world. Having a living family in Russia meant I could more easily travel through that difficult country and return to Rostov-na-Donu. I had intended to make that journey, but was daunted by the difficulties of doing so with no contacts and little language. Victor provided the logistical support to make that pilgrimage. Given the competing accounts of sister and brother, however, I needed to find a way to navigate the fictions of their evidence.

Popkin (2005) adjudicates a range of opinions on the symmetries between history and autobiography, and concludes that autobiography is not the same as history because writers of autobiography can make choices about how much historical context they employ, while historians are obliged to provide an accurate account of the times by examining a wide range of documentary evidence. History, he argues, is a collective rather than individual endeavour, as historians see themselves as 'adding bricks to a collectively created edifice of knowledge' rather than individual accounts (21-45). A life writer's truth must, however, also be open to verification. According to Eakin (1989), in promising to create an 'image of the real' the biographer or autobiographer is located firmly in the domain of the historian, as someone who seeks to reclaim the truth of the past, to draw conclusions from the actions of those who lived in another period of time and to submit that analysis to

⁴⁰ Ehrenberg and Grossman's (1980) collection of eyewitness testimonies in *The Black Book* documents the Rostov-na-Donu event as one of many such massacres that occurred in the Ukraine, Southern Russia and in other parts of the Soviet Union and Poland.

the test of verification (3-30). The discipline of history, the 'science' of creating a narrative about the past that is factually accurate and based on a rigorous and critical examination, evaluation, and selection of material from primary and secondary sources, it is implied, can provide the life writer with a set of tools to explore both the public and personal spheres of their subject. An historical account, which is constructed through rigorous historiographical practice, is believed to be a more reliable source of evidence. Novick makes this distinction:

To understand something historically is to be aware of its complexity, to have sufficient detachment to see it from multiple perspectives, to accept the ambiguities, including moral ambiguities, of protagonists' motives and behaviour. Collective memory simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes.

(Novick 1999:3-4)

In Novick's account, the historian's detached critical gaze provides for a more complex and reliable interpretation than the perspective of one individual or a group of individuals who have a vested interest in the story being told in a particular way. Collective memories, by his account, are selective, simplistic and subjective. Objectivity and subjectivity are pitted against each other as a binary, which in effect simplifies the possibilities of collective memory significantly and overlooks the subjectivities of the historian entirely. The line between the historian's truth and individual's truth is not so easily drawn, however, and is the subject of wide ranging debates.⁴¹ A closer analysis, of what history can and cannot be, is required, given my interest in the subjectivities of the author and the truth-value that can be achieved in this kind of project. What are the limits and possibilities of the historical method? How might historical 'fact' add to the verisimilitude of the text? How might historical interpretations add to an analysis of my mother's and Victor's accounts of the same event? These are huge questions so I can only review them briefly in this chapter to create a framework for analysing Elisaveta's letter and the historical context of that critical moment in her life.

⁴¹ Popkin (2005) provides a comprehensive summary of these debates and draws our attention to early autobiographical writing which was once considered synonymous with history (34).

Battles in history

Divergent views on historical practice exist within the discipline, as the opening quote to this chapter suggests. Carr challenged the central tenet of historiography that had traditionally claimed the rigorous analysis of archival evidence as a guarantee of authenticity. Since then, a range of approaches have been employed to enliven the usually dry genres of historical writing, to engage the reader and create empathy with the subjects (Popkin 2005). One Australian practitioner of ethnographic history writes:

In its broadest sense, ethnographic history is an attempt to return to the past the past's own present, a present with all the possibilities still in it, with all the consequences of actions still unknown. That gift to the past of its own present is always a reflective one.

(Denning 1998:211)

For Denning, a return to the 'past's own present' means that the historian has to 'share the uncertainties of any present moment' (66) and include the possibility of alternative interpretations. While Denning sees this as a way out of the subjective/objective binary, other historians regard the concept as nonsensical (Macfie 2011). Keith Jenkins (1991) argues that it is simply not possible to adequately represent the past or 'get inside someone's head', while Ferguson (2008) and Lowenthal (1985) argue that the past can only be viewed from the present standpoint. We can only interpret the past from what we know now. The position of the author/historian is what is at issue in these debates. The line between fact and fiction in historical writing has itself become a grey zone. Narrative theorists Hayden White (1987) and Frank Ankersmit (1989) tend to argue that historical narratives are identical to fictional ones in form.

The narrative theorist's view of history suggests that stories are invented not found and that the 'content of the form' of those stories is akin to the work of authors of fiction. Pihlainen (2002) suggests that the cognitive value of historical work is, however, not equal to fictional narratives. By 'cognitive value' he means the 'different assumptions involved in the production of different kinds of text' (40), which he argues is related to the 'cognitive value in the "human truth" of historical narratives' (56). In short, the primary aim of the historian is to represent the truth as

accurately as possible while the primary aim of a writer of fiction is to tell a good story. My aim, however, is to tell a good story that is also factually true.

According to Jenkins (1991) there are no un-problematical versions of historical truth. The historian can only represent a fraction of what happened in the past and then there will be problems with which sources are collected, how they are interpreted and endless disagreements about which perspectives are reliable and which are less reliable. Jenkins goes beyond recognising White's analysis of the rhetorical form in any writing, and challenges the whole enterprise arguing that history is produced by 'present minded workers' (31) who operate 'epistemologically, methodologically and ideologically' within the given paradigms of the times, the outcome of which is that their products 'structure and distribute the meaning of histories along a dominant–marginal spectrum' (31).

Historians, according to Jenkins, write history for someone, and that someone generally belongs to the dominant elites. Needless to say, Jenkins' view of history, has not been widely adopted by other historians, and has in fact attracted significant critical response. Evans' *In Defence of History* argues that postmodernist views of history are dangerous at worse and irrelevant at best, with one historian suggesting that 'postmodernist ideas are a menace to serious historical study' (Evans 1997:4).

Macfie (2011) takes a more satirical view and suggests the postmodernist view of history represents a paradigm shift from which 'not even the most brilliant minds of our generation can find a way of disentangling themselves' and questions whether the paradigm shift is in fact any better than the 'conventional' approach to history which

enabled us (however inadequately) to describe the things that happened in the past, to explain why they happened, and to pass judgement on the consequences of their happening – something which in any case, most of us do habitually most of the time in our daily lives.

(Macfie 2011:550).

Macfie evokes 'tradition', 'normalcy' and 'common sense' in his critique; missing (or perhaps deliberately ignoring) the point that the very purpose of post-structuralist approaches is to interrogate the ideologies implicit in the text, the 'common sense' perspectives of the dominant mode of discourse (Foucault 1972, Bourdieu 1986). Morgan, Munslow and Jenkins (2007) editors of the *Manifestos for History*, which

provides a critical view of traditional historiography, construct a convincing argument with respect to the omissions of history, the stories that are not told and the diverse perspectives that are not heard. The view that history is selective and privileges some stories above others, is one which feminist historians have taken up (Steedman 2002, Morgan 2006, Scott 1999) and which the academy in general has accommodated in the past decades with the growth of social histories that focus on marginal groups. Nevertheless, Macfie has a point. Domaska (1998), for example, is ultimately dissatisfied with the 'ontological insecurity' that leaves her with the desire for a meta narrative that 'transcends irony and attempts to genuinely ask and explore the questions of our time' (173). The 'duty to remember' (Wierworka 2006, Grinblat 2002), the moral and psychological imperative to know what happened in the past and why it happened, is what drives this narrative.

If history is a metaphor of the past (Pihlainen 2002) then the metaphor of a battleground around historiography seems appropriate, as the language employed in these discussions is combative. Evans is not inclined to 'pull up the drawbridge', preferring to be more open minded and face the 'invading hordes of semioticians, poststructuralists, new historicists, Foucauldians, Lacanians and the rest' and defend the integrity of his discipline by 'taking it on the chin' and seeing what he can learn in the process to strengthen his practice (Evans 1997:6), which suggests a more conciliatory approach. The narrative constructivist debate has, however, also had an unforeseen negative impact on the kinds of histories that are being written. As Pihlainen (2011) suggests, 'the near exclusive focus on representational means and strategies (on what we *can* do with the form) has led to losing sight of the goals and substance of historical research (on what we *do* do with the form)' (481).

The postmodernist perspective has drawn historians away from a focus on the political to a focus on consumption and entertainment, using the forms that are familiar and easy to digest (such as micro histories of cultural phenomena) which he believes to be trivial and non-transgressive or oppositional (Pihlainen 2011). The extent to which 'serious' history has been side-lined by more 'anecdotal' forms is not correlated with a concomitant survey of new histories

A more disturbing consequence of 'the death of history' is that such arguments play into the hands of Holocaust deniers and feed the moral relativists' position. I am convinced by Dolezel (1998) that: 'We land in the ultimate dystopia, a world

where we cannot make a distinction between what is false, what happened and what did not happen, who is honest and who is a liar, who is guilty and who is innocent, what is genuine and what is fake (15). We need to be very careful to distinguish between omissions and bias in history, and explicit and deliberate attempts to remake it; totalitarian historiography being a case in point. As Dolezel argues:

The historian's imaginary worlds are epistemic tools, and they do not affect the actual history. Unlike distorted history, they do not replace what actually happened with what did not happen. The notion of possible worlds enhances the epistemological repertoire of historiography, but it also reconfirms its truth-functional foundation.

(Dolezel 1998:10)

Dolezel's adjudication of the debates about historical truth, opens a space for imaginative exploration by the life writer. I have found it extremely difficult navigating the concept of truth within the frame of historical and moral relativism. I acknowledge the constructedness of all historical accounts and the inaccessibility of objective historical truth, given the complexities of individual and collective subjectivities and ideological hegemonies, but my belief that a truth does exist and that real events had a causal effect on the actions of my subjects in the real world of the past, provides a powerful imperative to come as close to that truth as I can. The preceding discussion suggests, we must make the effort to use the available facts to construct a reasoned plausible interpretation. In his writings on the Holocaust Browning (2003) emphasises the need for comprehensive research and analysis. 'Crucial to this historical enterprise, however, is critical analysis' (84). According to Browning, the critical judgment of the historian must be based on the widest evidentiary base that involves a critical analysis of a range of reliable sources just as one might in a court of law. Mindful of these debates, my imaginative reconstructions are based on as much evidence as I have been able to gather from what is reliably known.

Silence in history

Any discussion of Soviet history requires an understanding of the political structures of the given time and place. Life in Soviet Russia is inextricably connected to the ideologies and policies of the state and is the subject of much historical debate

which Radtchenko (2006) and Kaplan (2011) agree are made all the more impenetrable because of accusations of falsification and suppression of information. The Soviet archives, for example, contain much evidence of what happened in the past, but it is often difficult to access that material (Fitzpatrick 2010, Ward 2006). Soviet paranoia about 'bourgeois falsification' can be understood, Fitzpatrick suggests, on the basis of Cold War American falsifications of the Soviet experiment (Fitzpatrick 2010:3-8). Fitzpatrick was quite critical of American Sovietology, for its simplified and sometimes falsified view, but concludes in the end that 'when it came to falsification the Soviets had the edge'(8).

I need to know as much as possible about the fate of Jewish people in Russia during World War Two, particularly around Rostov-na-Donu, where evidence continues to be uncovered, analysed and contested to this day. The Jewish question in general is a politically contentious issue in Russian and Soviet history, which Soviet authorities have tried to avoid and/or suppress (Arad 2009). Accessing an uncontested truth is extremely difficult.

Evidence of the Holocaust in Russia was captured by two frontline journalists, in *The Black Book* (Ehrenburg & Grossman 1980). They eventually smuggled the manuscript out of the Soviet Union when they realised the text would otherwise be destroyed. The eyewitness accounts they collected have been corroborated with *Einsatzgruppen* field reports, which have been open to scholars in the past decades (Headland 1992, Yitzak et al 1988), and reveal a systematic program of mass shootings of the Jewish population in the USSR, prior to the establishment of the extermination camps. More than 2million perished in villages, quarries, forests, streets and homes across Eastern Europe, as Dubois (2008), a French Catholic priest, documents in *Shoah by Bullets*.

Father Dubois has been collecting testimonies from eyewitnesses to atrocities committed in the Ukraine during that time, over the past twelve years. His work in the field has been matched with research in German and Russian archives (Dubois 2008:216). The research team has rigorously matched the field evidence – eyewitness accounts and excavated bullet-casings in named sites – with the

Einsatzgruppen records. The story of these killings has taken some time to come to public attention as a result.⁴²

The reliability of oral accounts and individual memory is, however, also the subject of much conflicting opinion⁴³. Moreover, the official versions of what happened in Rostov-na-Donu at *Zmievskaya Balka*, in early August 1942 have varied over time. In the early post-war years a cavernous public silence surrounded this event and many other incidents where atrocities were committed against Jewish people in Russia. *The Black Book* contained just a few accounts from witnesses at Rostov-na-Donu, but enough to show that the *Einsatzgruppen* were operational there also. In the mid-seventies a memorial of sorts was erected stating that a large number of Russian civilians and soldiers were murdered and buried in *Zmievskaya Balka*. In 1994 a new memorial and museum were erected and the victims were named as Jews, victims of the largest mass murder of Jews in Russia. In 2006 the Jewish community of Rostov-na-Donu launched a campaign to name the victims of this atrocity.⁴⁴ The records kept by *Einsatzgruppen D*, which had carried out similar acts in other cities nearby, were strangely silent, however, on what happened at Rostov-na-Donu in August 1942. The reports have gone missing.

In early 2012, two years after I had visited the *Zmievskaya Balka* memorial⁴⁵ I was confronted by new political intrigues surrounding the place with the Ministry of Culture in Rostov-na-Donu installing a new plaque that described the victims as 'courageous Russians' rather than Jewish victims.⁴⁶ A year later, after much heated public debate, the wording has again been revised to acknowledge that it is the largest Holocaust site in Russia. This plaque is to be installed in the Spring of 2014.⁴⁷ The true story of *Zmievskaya Balka* continues to be revised and modified. It would seem that 'official' histories are always provisional and open to re interpretation.

⁴² Smale (2014) acknowledges this work on International Holocaust Remembrance day in *New York Times* http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/28/world/europe/a-light-on-a-vast-toll-of-jews-killed-away-from-the-death-camps.html?_r=1 (Accessed 29/12/2014)

⁴³ Mathaus (2009) addresses the slippages in survivor memory while Boyer and Wertsch (2009) provide insight into the social factors that impact on the reliability of memory. Further studies focus on trauma and memory (Berliner 2005). Dubois and his team acknowledge the complex nature of memory and testimony and undertake rigorous crosschecks of their evidence as a result.

⁴⁴ <http://www.rememberingrostov.com/>

⁴⁵ Later in this thesis *Zmievskaya Balka: The Snakes Ravine* tells the story of that experience, in the context of a discussion about the significance of places in life writing.

⁴⁶ <http://www.lemberik.org/home/?p=1344>; (Accessed March 2012)

⁴⁷ The new plaque is more detailed and inclusive of different stakeholder views <http://rostof.ru/article.php?chapter=8&id=20135103> (Accessed January 2014)

Historical truth in life writing

The historian's truth, however honestly and rigorously arrived at, invariably involves a large degree of speculation, deduction and synthesis, and is ultimately, as Clendinnen suggests, 'always uncertain, always unsatisfactory'.⁴⁸ Sometimes the primary evidence is simply not there, as with the victims of the Rostov-na-Donu genocide, a black hole in the lists of names that still exist in German archives from other such massacres. The history books are full of such omissions. How does the life writer fill in these gaps and navigate conflicting versions of the truth?

Lejeune acknowledges that in the process of imaginative creation authors can scarcely escape their own subjectivities 'the narrator is mistaken, lies, forgets, or distorts' (Lejeune in Eakin ed., 1989:22), but suggests that the narrative can remain authentic if the author recognises the possibilities of such omissions. The relationship between writer and reader, it is suggested, is more intimate.

In the novel *Romulus my Father* (Gaita 1998), the reader is enticed into the story of Raimond's family through the critical and analytical eye of a professional philosopher. Gaita's credibility as a truth-teller is achieved through his philosophical musings on the nature of character, morality and truth. The book captures a particular moment in time, the rural migrant experience of Victoria in the 1950s, as well as an insider perspective on the life of one family. The author seamlessly integrates the perspective of his childhood self and his adult self in the telling of his tale. Gaita maintains that people have been moved by the book because he tried to tell the story truthfully and with integrity, and cites the fact that he refused to invent more direct speech than he could remember as evidence of its authenticity: 'Nonetheless, that I conceived of the book as requiring that degree and kind of truthfulness shows, I think in its tone, and is why people would lose interest in it if they discovered that I had made things up' (Gaita 2011:91).

Gaita appears to have no doubts about the veracity of his text or its construction. One is tempted to believe that his account is in fact true; that his memories are somehow less susceptible to the usual slippages, inaccuracies and limitations of authorial subjectivities. Gaita's creation of his childhood self in the golden landscape of eastern Victoria is so dreamily evoked that we are seduced into belief, through

⁴⁸ Clendinnen (2008) <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/hindsight/the-struggle-of-memory-against-forgetting/3285864> (Accessed January 2013)

the lightness of his writing and his musings on the nature of the landscape, character, honesty and decency. We become part of Gaita's landscape, we imagine ourselves in it when we meet the characters he describes. The absence of more direct speech than Gaita could 'faithfully recall' is not what adds to the verisimilitude of the text; rather it is the creation of a fictional world that is steeped in the reality of the times, a world which envelops the reader in wistful longing for a bygone era. His imagined childhood becomes a template for reimagining our own. His memory of home invokes our memory of home. The appeal of the book is not in its truthfulness but in the author's attempts to reconstruct his memory of it. Gaita's father is eulogised as the most unique and remarkable man one could ever know. We are compelled by the potency of Gaita's description and analysis to take his word for it.

In seeking to fill in the gaps, to write Elisaveta into her own history, memorialize who she was, and provide some insight into her moral essence and character, there is much I can never fully understand about the 'extraordinary times' (Fitzpatrick 1999) in which she lived, with which to create a golden or ashen landscape. In this regard Victor was right in assuming superior insight to my own. He was there. He was burnt by that sun. The objective detachment that Novick (1999) suggests for historical analysis is difficult to achieve in any case, but particularly so when it is one's own history. I want to return to Elisaveta's 'past's own present' by trying to understand as much as I can about the times in which she lived, but I can only immerse myself in other people's versions of the events that surrounded her, the historians 'scientific evidence' in secondary sources, the oral histories of those who lived lives similar to hers, the snippets of information that her children tell me, the archival references to her existence and place in Soviet society in the 1930s and 40s. There are few primary sources available to me in the form of letters, diaries, journals, newspaper reports, archival records or documents.

The archives do, however, contain some record of the public figure of Elisaveta Bogdanovich, the Soviet judge who was chairman of the Union of Soviet Socialist Judges and Prosecutors of the Rostov Region from 1939 to January 1942. There are records that register her marriage, divorce and remarriage to the same man; records that document her expulsion from the Communist Party in January 1942. Sufficient primary and secondary sources exist to piece together a story of who Elisaveta might

have been as a public figure, as a woman who worked in the Soviet system during that period.

Elisaveta was the product of Lenin's Cultural Revolution, a young woman who embraced the call for all women to participate in building the new socialistic nirvana (Fitzpatrick 1978, Halle 1934). A relatively young Jewish woman, born in 1905 and raised in a Jewish shtetl, was given the opportunity to become an active member of the new order, where women were to play an equal role in shaping the new society.

We can understand the political context of her position in Soviet society by looking at historical accounts of the transformations within Soviet legal theory. In the mid 30s, for example, factory workers with limited education were trained in evening classes for workers, established for the purpose of forging a new breed of judges, law clerks and officials, who had no prior experience in the law. Elisaveta, who had not even completed high school, attended such night classes. We can imagine her sitting in a large room with others, tired after a day's work in the shoe factory, trying to absorb the processes and procedures of the new approach to law and order. Lenin believed that anyone could be a judge provided they based their judgments on the 'revolutionary sense of justice of the working class' (Beirne 1990: 62). The revolution in Law saw many highly qualified lawyers removed from their positions, particularly if they were critical of the new approach. The position of judge in Stalin's court required a belief in justice for the proletariat above others and for the revolutionary cause. Opportunities for an improved life existed for those who were prepared to embrace the ideology, at least outwardly.

Documents my uncle retrieved from the archives in Rostov-na-Donu state that Elisaveta was expelled from the Party, and her position as Chairman, in January 1942, as a result of her failure to obey instructions to evacuate when the Wehrmacht's forces approached the outskirts of the city in November 1941. The committee did not accept her explanation that her children were too unwell to travel. Elisaveta, the mother, appears to have acted against her own interests as a judge and apparatchik. I wonder how a woman who has risen through the ranks so spectacularly could make such an error of judgment. How can I understand her thoughts and emotions at this time without projecting my own subjectivity?

Historian, Rebecca Manley (2009), has researched Soviet policies around evacuation during this period. Between the German invasion in 1941 and the

autumn of the next year, approximately 16.5 million Soviet citizens were evacuated to the country's interior. The sheer scale of the task was considered a massive feat but there were 'deficiencies' and 'negative effects'. Evacuation was not necessarily in response to the German invasion but also part of a larger enterprise of filling population gaps in the outer states of the republic. The process of displacement both deprived evacuees of a place to live and broke up their communities; husbands were separated from wives, parents from their children, individuals from organisations that employed them, and friends from one another. Manley (2009) writes: 'In evacuation Soviet citizens struggled to constitute the networks they depended on for personal sustenance, and for survival – access to food, housing and work' (6). Manley refers to the importance of *blat*, where survival was dependent on the networks one developed to sustain daily life. Fitzpatrick (2000) provides an insight into the stratification of Soviet society and the privileges afforded Party members. Many wanted to join the Party but not all were accepted. My mother's memory of Elisaveta picking up the phone and getting a pair of shoes when there were none in the shops is an example of *blat*, a form of reciprocity that 'privileged' Party members were able to facilitate. One can imagine that Elisaveta and Pavel would have been loath to leave their comfortable life in Rostov-na-Donu and head to 'the wilds' of Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, where many evacuees from the south of the country were sent. Soviet officials in Rostov-na-Donu, on the other hand, wanted her and her husband out of the reach of the invading forces. They knew too much, were too closely connected to the machinery of the state. 'Those who were designated for evacuation and refused to deport were viewed with suspicion by state security organs' (Manley 2009:4).

Victor had his own theories about the life and fate of his parents. As an adult he had tried to reconstruct a profile of his family by poring over the documents that were left behind in the family home, searching the archives of Rostov-na-Donu for further evidence, and meditating on the family photos that had survived. 'She was finished either way,' he had written in one of his many emails to me. 'Either the Germans got her or they would have got her. She was going to be sent to the gulags. I'm sure of that.' This is a plausible hypothesis, given the nature of Stalin's purges which were brutal and punitive for perceived disobedience or disloyalty to the state (Deutscher & King 1984, Fitzpatrick 1999, Manley 2009, Figes 2007).

Fictions in evidence

Diaries and letters can provide a fascinating insight into the inner world of the subject and provide valuable data in the life-writing process. One letter, written in Elisaveta's hand, is all I have to connect with the living breathing speaking human being that she was. The letter was given to Victor by Elisaveta's youngest brother, Abram, when he returned from the war. It was all he had to give his sister's child. Victor was only 8 or 9 years of age at the time and living in a Soviet orphanage. It was a letter that he could not read properly at the time but he knew it was important, and stored it safely with his meagre possessions. One letter with which to imagine a woman, my grandmother, and all the possibilities of the future that awaited her as she wrote to her brother Abram, the youngest of five children, in April 1942, just four months before her death. Elisaveta did not foresee her end but we shall see that she understood the threat of the war that had besieged her country.

Given the complexities of translation of meaning from one language to another, I have had the letter translated separately by two different translators. The accuracy of translation does not, however, ensure that we can fully comprehend what Elisaveta was trying to communicate. The context within which she was writing allows the possibility for various interpretations. Elisaveta's letter needs to be understood within the context of the Soviet system of surveillance and censorship, her role as a Soviet judge who has recently been expelled from the Party, her relationship with her family in general and in particular with her mother and sisters, her relationship with her brother Abram, her role as a good Soviet citizen imbued with the ideology of the time, as well as her role as a woman, mother, wife, and comrade. I have drawn on the range of evidence available to offer a speculative analysis of her letter. I reproduce the full translation here for the reader:

Rostov
30 April 1942

Dear brother Abrasha!!!

We received a letter from you and cried from happiness to learn that you are alive.

For 6-7 months we haven't had any letters from you. We did not know your address and any attempts to find out your whereabouts via the military

commissariat were unsuccessful. They could not help us because it is unknown from where you had been mobilised. We lived with hope at least to receive one word about you from your friends. To find out if you are still alive? Wounded? Where are you now? Where could we write? You cannot imagine what happened with us when we got your letter. We cried and laughed with joy that you are alive.

Dear brother Abrashenka! You do not write in detail about yourself, how is your health? Where have you been wounded? What is your condition? We are very worried that your wound is life threatening. Please write about everything in detail but not to Bella's address. Write to me directly. She and mother are in poor health and it would be difficult for them to bring me your letter.

My dear, do not hide anything from me. I look differently on things. This war is with a very sinister enemy and victims are unavoidable. We have to struggle for their total destruction. We cannot forgive the spilt blood of innocent people, children, old men and women, civil population.

Be calm, get well and become a strong man again with good health so that if necessary you can go again to defend our beloved socialist motherland. Everybody in the family is alive and healthy – mother, Bella, Vitin'ka, Grisha, Pavlik, Lenchka, Andrushka (?) and Shura. Sofochka has arrived. Bella is still at home. Grisha is working a little. Vanichka is a good big boy, very clever and a good student.

My Lenchka is already grown up – 17 years old. She is in 8th grade, a member of the Communist Youth Organization. She is a very active member and performs special tasks given to her by the district committee of VLKSM. Vitin'ka is 7 years old. He attends kindergarten. He is learning his ABC in the evenings. He is a bit spoiled, but a good boy.

Pavlik is working. He has been mobilised but because of his illness he is temporarily released from his duties. I am working 3 times per week on defence construction sites we are building to protect our land from those blood-thirsty animals.

Mother is alive and healthy. Mitya is also in the army. His address was sent to you by Bella.

I am waiting for your immediate reply. Kiss you countless times. Get well.

Come to see us.

Your loving sister,

Liza.

I am immediately amused by the three exclamation marks, reminiscent of the rush of exclamation marks from my cousin Arkady and then Victor in our first email exchanges. The first thing that struck me about this letter was the warmth of tone in the writer's voice. She signs the letter, 'your loving sister, Liza'. She describes the joy she and the family felt upon hearing that he was still alive. She seems genuinely concerned for his well-being and any wounds he may have incurred. Elisaveta writes on behalf of the whole family. One can almost sense the breath of others in her

words. The collective 'we' is repeated throughout. On the surface it appears like a typical personal letter, adhering to specific letter writing protocols expected of this period, culture and place, with all its complex nuances. She uses the softer diminutive of Abram's name – Abrashenka – which in Russian culture denotes intimacy and familial connection.

The second thing that struck me was the patriotic socialist rhetoric in the reference to defending 'our beloved socialist motherland'. Despite the family's joy that one of theirs had survived injuries sustained in battle, they had to face the likelihood that he would again return to the front, and once again put himself at risk of injury or death. Stalin's order of 'not one step back' (Beevor & Vinogradova 2005) was acknowledged as the price of the liberation of the motherland. To suggest otherwise would have been regarded as disloyalty and cowardice. It is impossible to know how genuine Elisaveta's remarks really are, but the word 'socialist' is clearly included as a show of solidarity and loyalty to the cause of socialism, not just the defence of the motherland from a foreign invader. Her words are steeped in ideology. Later she writes of protecting 'our land' with a sense of pride and belonging. She makes a point of writing about her daughter's involvement with the communist youth organisation, the Komsomol.⁴⁹ I wonder if she wrote these words for her brother or for the censors who would invariably also read her letter.

Considered within the context of Soviet surveillance, the whole letter could be a coded message to her brother (and the censors), designed to demonstrate what a loyal and patriotic subject she is, despite her recent expulsion from the Party, as well as her being a loyal and loving sister, mother and daughter, a person of integrity. Elisaveta would have known better than many, that letters from 'disgraced persons' at this time might be steamed open and read, and that any cause for mistrust could result in immediate arrest and interrogation. She could not afford to attract further suspicion.

Elisaveta must have been fearful of her own future and that of her family. In her role as chairman of the Union of Soviet Prosecutors and Judges for the Rostov region she would have presided over many purges during 1938 and 1939; cases where people were expelled from the Party, imprisoned, sent into exile, subjected to

⁴⁹ VSLKSM: Vsesoyuzniy Leninsky Kommunistichesky Soyzuz Molodyozhi (*Young Communists Organization*)

aggressive interrogation and torture. The brutality of Stalin's rule is well documented. Figes' (2008) estimate, based on various accounts, is that some twenty-five million people were repressed by the regime during Stalin's 'reign of terror' from 1928 to 1953; one-in-eight families would have been affected. Elisaveta was a functionary in that regime. She was beholden to the Party for having both elevated her and then renounced her. She might also have gained some enemies due to the privileges she enjoyed, and judgments she may have been involved with. Both Victor and my mother have suggested this was highly probable and explains why Elisaveta decided to report for registration on that fateful day in August fearing the family would otherwise be denounced.

It is reasonable to assume that the full force of Elisaveta's punishment for disobeying the instruction to evacuate had not yet been handed down, as the country was under siege by the Wehrmacht, and defence of the motherland was foremost in the minds of her superiors. Communications were disrupted by the chaos of war, so Elisaveta continued to work for the cause despite being ousted from the Party. She writes of the three days she labours on construction work to protect the city. This might have involved building bunkers and barriers that were being erected to protect against the tanks that had entered the city the previous year.

As I read and reread the words of the woman who was 'finished', I try to understand what she must have been thinking and feeling as she wrote to her brother, who has been wounded at the front. I wonder how they might have been together as children, as brother and sister; did she have to look after him as she expected her daughter to look after her young son? Abram, the 'dearest brother', receives a letter from the sister who is estranged from the family. He doesn't know that she has been expelled from the Party. He doesn't know that Elisaveta's fate has been sealed. He doesn't know that the *Einsatzgruppen* are sweeping through the southern states of the Ukraine behind the invading troops, intent on shooting every Jewish person and their family that they can gather together. Or did he? Did they? Did Elisaveta know of the massacre that occurred in October 1941, one hundred kilometres away in Mariupol (Ehrenberg & Grossman 1980:70-76), the place where her family once lived and where she was most probably born?

Silence was a part of Russian life during the Stalinist period. People kept secrets from their family, husbands, mothers and fathers. One could not risk expressing one's true thoughts for fear others might be forced to reveal them under torture or interrogation. My mother says she knew nothing of the evacuation, their failure to evacuate or subsequent dismissal from the Party. She had no idea of what was going on in her mother's and step-father's minds. It is, however, difficult to know what my mother really knew then as so much has been blocked from her memory, which I will discuss further in chapter 25. In *The Whisperers*, Figs (2008) captures stories of people who withheld the truth of their origins as kulaks⁵⁰ or Jews from husbands and wives, from their children and work mates. They withheld information so as to both survive and to protect the ones they loved. Silence and concealment cry out from the space between the lines of Elisaveta's letter.

Elisaveta writes to her brother: 'Please write about everything in detail but not to Bella's address. Write to me directly. She and mother are in poor health and it would be difficult for them to bring me your letter.' I wonder what she is trying to convey. She wants him to write to her directly. The return address on the envelope has her old workplace address in the court, rather than her home address. She indicates that her sister Bella and mother are in poor health, yet elsewhere she has said that everyone is in 'good health'. Is this Elisaveta acknowledging the estrangement from mother and sisters? Was she closer to Abram than her other siblings? Was he more accepting of Elisaveta's choice to marry a Polish man, and to be a Party member? Were his attempts to take care of Victor after the war a result of a promise he had made to Elisaveta? What do the silences reveal about the relationship between brother and sister, mother and daughter, sister with sister?

The next words leap off the page: 'My dear, do not hide anything from me. I look differently on things.' Is Elisaveta referring here to Abram's injuries? Is she suggesting that she can bear the truth of his suffering while her mother and sister might not, or is there a deeper meaning involved in these words? I wonder what Elisaveta was thinking when she wrote the words: 'I look differently on things'. Does she see things differently than her mother and sister, or differently to how she once did? Was she trying to send a message to her brother that her views had changed;

⁵⁰ Kulaks were landholders who were considered to be capitalists by the socialist revolutionaries, and therefore enemies of the people, even if they were poor in relative terms.

that a critical shift had occurred in her thinking? Had her expulsion from the Party caused her to rethink her long held beliefs? Was Elisaveta a true patriot and socialist or a pragmatic apparatchik like many others, willing to do whatever it took to survive and to protect her children? These questions are unanswerable, but they demand some response, a critical discussion at least.

In the *Whisperers* project led by Orlando Figes between 2003 and 2006, three teams of researchers from the Memorial Society in St Petersburg, Moscow and Perm recovered several hundred family archives (letters, diaries, personal papers, memoirs, photographs and artefacts) that had been concealed in secret drawers and under mattresses in private homes across Russia. In each family, extensive interviews were carried out with the oldest relatives, who were able to explain the context of these private documents and relate them to the family's history. This collection of documents and testimonies about private life in the Stalin period, reflecting the interior world of ordinary families and individuals, provides a rich context for better understanding how that period was experienced by a broad cross section of the society. Figes attempts to uncover the private thoughts and lives of Soviet citizens, and the double lives they lived 'concealing information and opinions, religious beliefs, family values and traditions, and modes of private existence that clashed with Soviet public norms' (Figes 2007:xxxii). Like other historians in recent times, Figes is interested in Soviet subjectivities and the degree to which the interior life of the individual citizen was dominated by the regime's ideology. The internalisation of Soviet values and ideas is evident in Elisaveta's letter to her brother. Any attempt to penetrate Elisaveta's words must be considered within the social and political context of Soviet Russia at war with an 'insidious and barbaric' enemy, where individual wants and needs are secondary to the collective good.

Soviet ideology inserted itself into all aspects of a citizen's life, from their spiritual beliefs, family values, professional ambition and loyalty to everything the Party hoped to achieve in the name of socialism. Figes (2007) quotes maverick Russian historian Mikhail Gelfand⁵¹ as saying it was no good blaming everything on Stalin, when the real power and lasting legacy of his reign of terror was 'in the Stalinism that entered into all of us.' Adherence to state authorised history and ideology were

⁵¹ Figes, O. In *New York Review of Books*, April 2007. Accessed 7/7/2011.

an intrinsic element of Soviet life during this time, particularly for those who held positions of authority. As Figes (1996) and Carleton (2010) both observe, heroic narratives imbue the cultural products of that nation.

If Elisaveta embraced Soviet 'utopianism' to escape the confines of the Jewish shtetl, she would have had to adopt at least some of the values and beliefs of the socialist ideal. This included the belief that the family was a bourgeois construction and that Bolshevism should seek to eradicate this aspect of the daily life of citizens and workers. Workers should be loyal foremost to the cause. The Soviet ideal was to replace the family unit with collectivisation and loyalty to the state. The subjects of Figes's (2007) interviews, whose parents were officials and loyal Party members, consistently report an absence of warmth in family life.

Elsewhere, Stalin's daughter Svetlana writes of her life in the inner sanctum, where political meetings and gatherings were commonplace. 'My mother spent very little time with us. She was always off somewhere. She had a great deal of work and studying to do, jobs for the Party and other things' (Alliluyeva 1967:108). My own mother's comments about being unloved and neglected by her mother seem to fit into this same pattern of distancing between parents and children described both in *The Whisperers* and in Alliluyeva's accounts. Child parent relationships reflected the political and cultural revolution of Soviet times, the collectivisation of the individual human being. In 1917, Maxim Gorky wrote 'the new structure of political life demands from us a new structure of the soul' (Figes 2007:4). The extent to which individuals embraced such ideals in their private lives cannot be easily understood from retrospective accounts and in particular from the oral histories gathered after the fact.

Oral historians largely agree that memory is not a reliable source of factual information, irrespective of the storyteller's passionate belief in the veracity of their own account. What *is* remembered, according to Clendinnen, is not necessarily the facts about the event but rather how the witness *felt* about the event at the time (*Hindsight*, ABC, 2012). In reconstructing the event that produced the feeling, the individual constructs a narrative that is based on a range of information that will often go beyond their own experience. It includes fragmented memory, what they have subsequently read or heard, in short the sum total of their thoughts and reflections on the event. I am mindful of this when listening to Victor's stories and

deliberations. Some memories could genuinely be those of a 7 year old child, but many of the stories he presents as fact are based on the opinion and stories of others. He has constructed a narrative about his parents and sister that makes sense in the context of what others have told him and what he has experienced as a Soviet citizen. The truth in his case is informed, but highly speculative.

It seems reasonable, however, to assume that in fulfilling her role as a Soviet judge Elisaveta would have required significant determination and resilience. She would have had to 'play the game' in order to be selected from the floor of the shoe factory to attend the training to become a lawyer in Stalin's courts. Gaining Party membership, was a tortuous process, according to Fitzpatrick (1978), and involved learning the theory, writing detailed applications and undergoing rigorous questioning. It was not easy to bluff the interrogators. We don't know why and how Elisaveta became a Party member, but we can surmise that she seized opportunities that were available. Her family did not approve of her decision to marry a Polish immigrant who was not Jewish. What was their attitude to her Bolshevism? Were they loyal communists also? Did they support her decision to work in Stalin's courts? Such questions raise other questions and lead me to query Elisaveta's motivations and wonder about the circumstances surrounding her final days in Rostov-na-Donu. I am, however, in no position to pass judgment on her actions.

Complex histories

In wrestling with the truth of history and its application in the life writing process, I have navigated my way through the complexities of personal memories, collective memories, semi-fictional reconstructions, factual historical analysis and the shifting boundaries of historical revisionism, to construct a narrative about my mother and grandmother that is as historically true as I can make it.

The post-Soviet era, from the late 1980s to the present, has seen the country struggle with its own history. The rejection of Marxism, led to new conceptual frameworks in Soviet historiography according to Kaplan (2009) and Ward (2006). Critical soul searching has given rise to differing views about the past, with many older citizens seeking a return to a strong leader like Stalin (Figs 2009). The rise of ultra-nationalism in Russia adds another layer of complexity to what is already a dense history. Putin's rise to power has resulted in the state seeking to regain

control over the content and form of official history, arguing against a history ridden with guilt and shame (Kaplan 2009, Figes 2009). Grossman (2009) provides a window into the Soviet mind (or soul) and demonstrates the complex moral dilemmas that loyalty to country and culture produces. In the final analysis, when Grossman himself was close to death, his fictional character Ivan, in the unfinished novel *Everything Flows*, concludes that in reality 'the Russian soul has been enslaved for a thousand years' (Flanagan 2010), an enslavement that would have been experienced by all citizens.

Australian readers can draw on examples in their own country where the desire for a 'heroic national narrative' (Clendinnen 2006) might sometimes seek to avoid the less palatable aspects of our own history, such as the treatment of Aboriginal Australians, to better understand the dilemma facing Russians in constructing a narrative about the past. Historical judgments are subject to such complex reflexivity. If Elisaveta's life was one of enslavement to the Russia in which she lived and died, history will no doubt judge her as more victim than perpetrator. Any such pronouncement is, however, open to further interpretation.

20. Aftermath

Melbourne, October 2009

Victor and Lena are sitting on the couch together. He is holding her hand and she is leaning into him as if she might otherwise fall over. I can't understand everything they are saying but I know they are talking about Rostov-na-Donu, their house, the war and their parents. They seem to recover the same territory seeking to fill in the gaps. In the three weeks that Victor has been with us, they have only been apart for a few days. They have become friends, but I know that my mother is finding it a strain. She wants him to go back to Russia, and she doesn't want him to go back.

I am still trying to understand her ambivalence about this miraculous reunion. She seems to blow hot and cold.

'Niet, niet,' Victor's voice is insistent. He is shaking his head and clutching her hand. *'No, you had to go! They would have found you and killed you otherwise.'*

I know what this is about. My mother keeps apologising for leaving him alone as a child. It is a theme that has only come to the surface since Victor's arrival in Australia. He says there is nothing to forgive, and she seeks absolution. In all the conversations I have had with her prior, she had never expressed any feelings of guilt. He was a spoilt brat and she wasn't sure she felt anything for him, was the recurring theme. I wonder if this guilt has been a black stain on her soul for sixty seven years. Perhaps it is this guilt that forced her to close the door on all things Russian, to block out her past. Now she is embarrassed that she has lost her language and her memory. He remembers so much and she so little. He remembers her. He is the only person in her life who knows what she was like as a girl in Russia. The little boy clung to memories of his sister, created a shrine to her, wrote poems about her. He made his childhood golden. He kept the light burning.

Victor is delighted to be part of our family and warmly embraces his sister's children and their children. His one regret is that it has all come too late for him to meet Paul, my father, and Lena when she was younger and more active.

'If only we could go back home together,' he laments, putting his arm around her shoulders.

My mother shifts uneasily in his embrace. She cannot go home. Her body will not allow her. Her fear of what she might feel there is greater than her curiosity, greater

than a lifelong yearning to reconnect with her younger self. On a number of occasions she has told me that she thinks she would die if she went back to Rostov-na-Donu and saw her old home again, signalling to me the terrible unresolved loss she has tried to repress. Victor's reappearance in her life has opened an old wound. The suture she has so carefully embroidered in her psyche has unravelled. Victor survived and so did the house they inhabited. Not everything was destroyed. My mother needs to rewrite the old script but does not have the will to do so. Yet the pull of Rostov-na-Donu seems stronger than gravity. She hangs on every word about this place. Victor has gone back there many times. He reminds her of the places she took him as a child and how they are now. It is all still there he tells her. She delights in that fact, but she herself cannot go back and face the experience of the return. She fears that she would not *physically* survive a return to that city. The significance of the geographic space of my mother's story demands interpretation.

21. The Narrative of Place: Embodied Memory

‘And always in our daydreams, the house is a large cradle.’

(Bachelard 1994:7)

We have arrived at a place where we can almost touch the horizon, the curve of the world before us, the valley of death yet to be traversed. We are moving through space, reading the present and looking back to the past, hoping to catch a glimpse of truth, that haunting presence that accompanies us on our journey, sometimes illuminated and sometimes dimmed by the swirling fog that comes and goes. Here, in this particular place, the embodied self understands that by putting one foot in front of the other, arms outstretched, we can move forward in space to another place.

The embodied self is with us from the first. As children we perceive ourselves as entities in a particular location, through optical flow, touch and hearing. We begin to experience the world with our bodies in a process where ‘we become fully aware that this embodiment is our being’ (Neisser 1988:40). The embodied self is present in and experiences place in its many manifestations, both physically and metaphorically. Yet, we are never alone. These physical explorations of self are generally conducted in the family or community. The embodied self explores place in community. Neisser (1988) discusses five kinds of self-knowledge that inform a sense of self, namely, an ecological self, an interpersonal self, an extended self, a private self and a conceptual self. I use the term *embodied* rather than *ecological* as it denotes the idea of body-memory, of which place is one element. The concept of embodied memory captures the idea that bodies are located in place, as physical sensing kinaesthetic entities, and that memory is transmitted to the psyche through that total mind body experience, as Bachelard (1994) explores in the *Poetics of Space*, where place becomes a metaphor for experience and memory.

The role of *place* in the life-writing project is therefore complex and multifaceted. Of primary consideration for me in this discussion is the relationship between the physical experience of place and memory. The body remembers. The landscape, the spatial orientation and the structure and contents of the house that the subject inhabits provide a decorative container for making that physical experience seem real. Place exists in a concrete realm. Social and cultural

interrelationships within the landscape provide a further layer of meaning that contributes to the overall significance of place (De Certeau 1988). The community remembers.

Instructive here is Halbwachs' (1994) concept of the city or village as a 'paradigmatic image of collective memory' (40) created by the communities that inhabit it. The group, according to Halbwachs, develops a shared identity based on collective memory: 'It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognise and localise their memories' (40) through a process of collective articulation and revision. Community constructs memory and concept of place. Thus, the embodied and collective experience of place may be reflected in the psyche as 'an image that reverberates' (Bachelard 1994:xvi), but only gains coherence through 'the memory of society' according to Halbwachs (1994:42).

In engaging with places, the life writer is able to excavate the stories that people leave behind in the home, the landscape and the built environment, as a means of contextualising the subject's experience. The place becomes a metaphor for understanding experience, for remembering that which was felt, and as a concrete marker of a real place that exists, or existed in a specific geographic location. An exploration of place can construct boundaries and regions in the story to add deeper layers of meaning and hence enhance the truth value of the text. This is the idea that I want to explore in this chapter in preparation for a return to my mother's hometown and the place where her mother is buried.

The contents of home

The house is the space the body inhabits first, and provides shelter and comfort. It is the safe retreat, the place to reflect and recharge; the space of being. The house for Bachelard provides a poetic space where memory and dreams reverberate from the images the house creates in the mind's eye – 'the topography of our intimate being' (1994:xxxvii). Thoughts and daydreams are linked metaphorically to the physical manifestation of the house. The ecological self evolves and develops into the fully embodied self that, according to Bachelard's poetics, carries with it the memory of all dwelling spaces one has ever inhabited. The dwelling place becomes the receptacle for memory in the psyche.

Hoffman captures childhood attachment to home in *Lost in Translation* and describes every nook and cranny of her family's three-room apartment, which accommodates four adults and two children. From the safety of her bed she can recreate her 'universe' in her mind before going to sleep each night.

I am lying in bed, watching the slowly moving shadows on the ceiling made by the gently blowing curtains, and the lights of the occasional car moving by. [...] Occasionally, a few blocks away I hear the hum of the tramway, and I'm filled with a sense of utter contentment. [...] I repeat to myself that I'm in Cracow, Cracow, which to me, is both home and the universe.

(Hoffman 1998:5)

In everyday life she retraces familiar routes through the city that she has walked many times that 'may yet hold so many surprises' (6) and claims it as '*My Cracow*'. Her home in Poland, whilst modest by the standards of her new home in Canada, assumes mythical proportions saturated with *tęsknota* (longing) that stays with her through her transitions. Upon returning to Poland many years later she retraces the familiar routes, memorised in her dreams from 'her night wanderings' and sits under the same chestnut tree, where 'I once sat cupped in the heart of childhood knowledge' (239) and conducts her own private pilgrimages to places that no longer mean to her what they once did. As an adult, she sees things differently, through the lens of her post-Cracow experience, and through the lens of history (Hoffman 1993). Yet every experience of place is attached to the inhabitants of that place, who together shape the conceptions of space. The home of the psyche has been shaped by linguistic and cultural forms, as Hoffman concludes towards the end of *Lost in Translation*.

My mother was able to visualise her childhood home, a place she had not seen for more than sixty years. She remembered the layout of her house intimately, as did Victor, but sometimes there were cracks in their joint reconstructions. They saw different things in the city they walked together in their imaginations.

De Certeau (1988) regards every story as a travel story, a spatial practice that uses geographic markers as characters in the story, as the stage on which actions take place. He distinguishes *place* and *space*, where the place is defined as geographic location that 'excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location', while space relates to the interactions that occur in that place. '*Space* is a

practiced place. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers' (117).

De Certeau's (1988) *grammar* of space denotes 'pedestrian speech acts' as what the walker does by 'acting out' the place and by moving from one space to the other (98). The practice of everyday life transforms the 'dead' place to a space that 'acts and sees', where the walker creates an 'enunciation' that can be read like a text. The walker has agency in space and interprets it in ways that can challenge the order of things imposed by the 'panoptical procedures'⁵² of those who control that space (Foucault 1975). In revisiting places, the walker changes their enunciation of the space. Hoffman's re-reading of her childhood universe as an adult changes her enunciation of the place.

De Certeau's distinction of space and place, however, does not necessarily cover the whole question of 'where' in life stories, according to Laurence (2010:123), who suggests that some places might be 'fragmented memories', or 'imagined spaces', while others take on mythological proportions, as places in the psyche. Place cannot always be locked down into one spatial location. The *tęsknota* that Hoffman describes so powerfully seems to come from a deeper space within her psyche, 'the poetics of space', from within her very sense of self, a clear space that transcends demarcation, of which the city of Cracow is merely the metonym. The collective memory of the city challenges her imagination and in absentia longing for the city when she returns. De Certeau (1988) does, however, acknowledge these shifts: 'Casual time is what is narrated in the actual discourse of the city: an indeterminate fable that is better articulated on the metaphorical practices and stratified places than on the empire of the evident in functionalist technocracy' (203).

Fragmented memories and imagined spaces are in fact what make the city an 'indeterminate fable'; fables which create mythological layers in the palimpsest of the city's stories.

The echoes of landscape

Simon Schama (1995) takes us into primordial time and place where 'human' space is first created. He proposes that every landscape – forest, river, or mountain – is the

⁵² In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault (1975) uses the term 'panoptician' to analyse the 'all seeing power' of public physical spaces, particularly institutions such as schools, hospitals, prisons, which are designed so as to be able to observe, examine, order, discipline and control.

work of a mind, a repository of the memories and obsessions of the people who have gazed upon them. 'Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory, as from layers of rock' (7). From the first, the cultural forms that inhabit landscapes modify them 'for better or worse' (8) to suit their own ends, and impose upon them cultural definitions of meaning and beauty. These interactions create modified landscapes that tell human stories and give rise to landscape mythology.

By clearing the ground for a dance or ceremony, or in designating one place as being the site for specific cultural activities, the Aboriginal people of Australia have enunciated the spaces they inhabit (Memmot & Long 2002). They developed complex social and cultural practices in their co-existence with their environment and managed it like an 'estate' (Gammage 2011). The trees, rocks, waterholes, mountains, rivers, hillocks and estuaries were ascribed a cultural significance. Moreover those geographical forms were created by ancestors from another time, the 'dreamtime' or 'creation', connecting them physically, spiritually and culturally to 'country'. Story and ritual were the means by which knowledge of country was transmitted to the next generation.

Schama (1995), attempts to excavate beyond the 'conventional sight level to recover the veins of myth and memory that lie beneath the surface' (14) of Europe, the continent of his ancestors (and mine). His project is to reveal how landscape myths are inherited and embedded in the history of a place. 'National identity,' he argues, 'would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition: its topography mapped, elaborated, and enriched as a homeland' (15).

National pride and a sense of belonging are often expressed by allegiance to particular landscape myths and the cultural traditions forged by people who have co-existed in the landscape, who have a shared experience with the land. My grandmother's exhortations to her brother Abram to defend their motherland, is delivered in the context of a particular landscape tradition. Her words carry within them a connection to everything that the landscape of Russia means to them – its vast steppes, rivers, mountains – history and mythology, past and present. Schama tries to reveal the struggle for identity that is embedded in the layers of landscape.

Schama's journeys through Europe led him firstly to his own ancestral lands (Lithuania/Poland) where he felt the urge to be in his grandfather's landscape, to

experience the land that inspired such nationalistic fervour in its inhabitants. 'I hungered for some familiar name, scanned the map of the frontier country for something that echoed' (35). He was unable to find that familiar marker, a tombstone that signified his grandfather's existence, a footing that signified a house, an ancient villager who remembered a family named Schama. The landscape did not reveal its secrets to him simply by his being there, but he was able to bring his own meaning to it, because he knew that the land had witnessed the demise of his Jewish ancestors; it contained their remains. Schama's project of excavating the relationship between landscape and memory points to the dialectical relationship between history and place.

In naming my mother's childhood home as Rostov-na-Donu, by the River Don that flows into the Sea of Azov, I am locating her memory in a particular mythological space. The steppes of the River Don were called 'the wild fields' and proclaim an ancient history that goes back some 40,000 years, with the Cossacks occupying the area from the 14th century. The writings of Mikhail Sholokhov, particularly the epic *And Quietly Flows the Don* (1934), sought to capture the mythic tales of the Don Cossacks who were renowned for their horsemanship and military skills. While the Cossacks spoke Russian, they controlled their own land and governed the steppes of the Don as an independent tribe until the civil war, the revolution that put an end to their way of life. When my mother danced the Cossack in Germany she evoked both the myth and memory of her homeland.

Rostov was the city at the end of a river that has travelled some 1900 kilometres over vast steppes for thousands of years. The riverscape has assumed such heroic proportions that the city of Rostov must always acknowledge its presence when attributing a name to the location the built environment occupies on that landscape.

Reading the city

De Certeau suggests that the city can be read like a text that is anthropological, poetic and mythical, a constructed space which both delineates the power and control of the dominant forces as well as the palimpsest of stories of people who were once there. De Certeau sees the city as reflecting the daily practices and events of everyday life, and acknowledges the contribution made by Halbwachs to the

understanding of collective memories. Barthes explains that the semiotic messages of the city become part of each 'reader's' experience.

The city is a discourse and the discourse is truly a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants; we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it. Still the problem is to bring an expression like the 'language of the city' out of the purely metaphorical stage.

(Barthes 1971, reprinted in Leach, 1997:168)

Many European cities tell the story of World War Two through buildings still pock marked by bullet holes, but the visitor might not recognise them as such and view them merely as signs of decay. The reader of the city brings with them understandings of place and assumptions about what the city has been. Barthes (1997) likens these readings to the 100,000 million poems of Queneau, 'where one can find a different poem by changing a single line, unawares, we are somewhat like this avant-garde reader when we are in the city' (170). Each reader writes their own story of the city they experience.

Creation place

Children are cartographers, who move out from the safety of home to map the world as if it is new, ready to be explored and discovered by them. The landscape and the built environment are inextricably connected to the embodied memory of childhood.⁵³ The child's interaction with the place is, however, also shaped by interactions with the 'practiced space' of others. Victor has reclaimed his childhood place by revisiting and remembering. He has remade the embodied connection by physically re-walking the streets and by rewriting his memory of it. My mother's connection appears more distant.

Chagall maintains that a certain 'aroma' of the artist's birthplace 'clings to his work' and becomes 'the handwriting of the artist' (Chagall qtd in Wulschlager 2008:9). Does this 'certain essence' or 'aroma' cling to each individual throughout their lives, even if not revisited or expressed in artistic forms? Does the childhood home leave an indelible mark in the body that can never be erased, as Bachelard (1994) suggests, or is this indelible imprint of place an illusion that is recreated

⁵³ *The Cartographer* (Twohig 2011) and *My Place* (Wheatley 1987) both use childhood maps of their respective subject's local territories – each spatial marker contains a story i.e. a favourite tree, playground, scary place or site where incidents occurred.

through the process of memory? When my mother left Rostov-na-Donu, she had no idea that she would never return. Her yearning for 'home' has survived until this day, but she has no desire to see how it has changed. The imprint pulls and is pushed away.

Memory and myth

One of the techniques I have used when trying to reconstruct events with my mother is to create an outline of her journey from Rostov-na-Donu to the Rhineland. This map provided a geographic order of events and often produced newly remembered details, proving to be more reliable than dates and times. She recalled that the train went through Lodz (Poland), and the de-licing process which she had never mentioned before. A day later she rang to tell me that it was in Lodz that she was advised to choose farm work at Wuppertal. Each of these places was a city that could be located on maps and checked against rail routes to map her journey, from naïve Soviet schoolgirl to displaced person migrating to Australia.

My mother's description of the Rhineland villages and her estimates of the distance between villages were precisely remembered, as if her body had measured the distance. With the benefit of Google Maps I was able to confirm that the village of Polsch was indeed only 3 kilometres from the village of Kehrig, as she had estimated. Her journey from Rostov-na-Donu to Australia is a text that maps the social, political, cultural and psychological transformations that her embodied self experienced.⁵⁴

The physical connection to place is also realised through artefacts. Victor clung to objects, images and documents from his home as proof of his previous life as a non-orphan. My mother took four photographs, some of her own clothes, and her mother's coat. Victor took his father's jacket, even though it was also much too big for him. He sent me the photograph of the 17 year old young man wearing the oversized jacket of his father. These relics are powerful symbols for understanding the visceral nature of the loss that both Lena and Victor experienced. For Victor, memory of place and the objects contained within it were directly connected to the

⁵⁴ Browning (2003) suggests that people's memory of landscape is often more reliable than dates, e.g. the trees were blossoming, the potatoes were being planted, the leaves were falling and so on. From there the historian can better verify the reliability of the account and compare with other sources.

healing of the wound. 'Those memories kept me warm,' he wrote. His childhood home assumed mythological proportions. It was like the place remembered him.

For many post-war migrants to Australia, the lost homeland is symbolically preserved either with objects or with recreated symbols. My parents had few concrete artefacts from their homelands. In their place they created sanitised memories and mythological symbols of place transmitted through daily life – the food they ate, the vodka they drank, the maintenance of a huge garden that mirrored the village plot.

As the child of migrants I inherit allegiances to invisible ancestral lands on other continents, wrought from the memories and dreams of the displaced. My memory of place, my sense of belonging and identity, my allegiance to community and loyalty to country is, however, fundamentally located in the continent known as Australia. My identity has been shaped by the places I have inhabited, but within a distinct migrant sub culture that occupied that continent, because my parents' writing of place is what initially formed my identity.

The culture my parents tried to recreate in Australia was based on an idealised image they had of Poland, that mythical lost place where my father (not my mother) once belonged. We were incited to cherish this ancestral land, as if it were our true homeland, a signifier of our displacement in the foreign culture and landscape of Australia. Each summer, when the first cherries appeared in the shops, my father would lament the loss of his childhood home and the giant cherry tree where he and his friends used to gorge themselves with unimaginably sweet and juicy cherries.

'I can't describe it,' he'd say, wistfully biting into an inferior Australian cherry and then shaking his head in disappointment. 'You can't imagine how sweet and juicy and fleshy they were. The juice would just dribble down your chin.'

Each summer I learned to be disappointed with Australian cherries even though I found them delicious. My father's cherry tree was still the best, and even though we had never tasted its fruit, I longed to experience the sensation of cherry juice dribbling down my chin. When I finally stood under that tree with my father in 1976 I was not surprised and only mildly disappointed that it had produced such pale sour imitations of the cherries my father had described.

'It has been a hot dry spring and summer,' he lamented. 'This tree is now old. Forty, fifty years ago it had the best cherries. But it lives on. Look at it!'

My father's cherry tree had waited for this homecoming. It had burrowed its roots into the soil that belonged to him, withstood the war and many cold winters, witnessed the death of villagers, and sheltered children and grandchildren from the burning sun. The earth that my father had so longed to run through his fingers was now a stranger to him, while the fruit that he had anticipated with relish attacked his tongue with vicious sourness. Nothing was the same. The *hatka* of his childhood had been set alight at war's end by vengeful Ukrainian villagers, and then replaced by a solid new home with large rooms and high ceilings. The village water well, from where they lugged buckets of water, had been replaced by taps and pipes fed by town water supply. The family plot of land, what his sister called the 'family jewels', had been lost to the *Kolhoz*.⁵⁵

The return of the prodigal brother to the village he had forsaken to start a new life in Australia was tinged with bittersweet memory, regret and guilt. The Paul Suda who returned to Markopol some thirty seven years after going off to defend his country had already sworn allegiance to another land, planted potato seedlings in a gully that was once full of ferns, in the valley that was dug up for coal. He had learned to love another landscape. Like Hoffman, the returned migrant has assumed another identity that is incongruous with the self he imagined himself to still be. What he remembered was a mere 'simulacrum' of the real experience, the flashing orb of memory.

The place remembers

The lands my parents escaped from witnessed many deaths and much destruction. The war caused massive damage to the built environment, with many cities reduced to rubble. People were traumatised, and places were traumatised. The question that De Certeau and Schama both raise is the role that the place itself plays in human memory. De Certeau (1988) suggests that the city is haunted by spirits from the past. 'There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can 'invoke' or not (108).' This 'haunting' might only appear as a 'fleeting glimmer' where someone can 'feel good here' or 'bad there', rather than seeing a ghostly apparition.

⁵⁵ Kolhoz – Collective farm

Maria Tumarkin begins the first chapter of *Traumascapes* with an account of the destruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, 'to this day perceived as one of the bleakest hours in Russian spiritual history' (2005:1). She recounts how the land resisted redevelopment and prevented the great Soviet palace intended for the site from being built. Eventually, the gaping hole was replaced with a grand swimming stadium.⁵⁶ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin declared that the cathedral would be rebuilt in the same location. The site did not resist this reconstruction. The replica cathedral dominates the cityscape as the original once did, but does not, according to Tumarkin, exude the same spiritual aura. Tumarkin's thesis is that the place remembers: 'Traumascapes are a distinctive category of places transformed physically and psychically by suffering, part of a scar tissue that stretches across the world' (13).

Traumascapes are places where the shared suffering of many becomes a collective experience that resonates into the future. Post-traumatic stress disorder is a condition where an individual is so overwhelmed by their experience that they are no longer able to function as they once did. The experience is so overwhelming that it reasserts itself well after the physical scars have subsided. In such cases, the memory of the event becomes a re-living of the experience often in a more intense form (Knippner et al, 2012). Tumarkin suggests that the physical space itself becomes the site of recurring trauma that can reverberate long into the future both in collective memory and in the experience of the place.

My father's cherry tree was on contested land that was variously part of Poland, the Ukraine, the Soviet Union and now the Ukraine again. Ethnic tensions simmered below the surface of our joyful reunion with Dad's family. My cousin's brother-in-law, an ethnic Ukrainian, sat at the banquet table that was prepared in our honour, and denounced my father's claim to being ethnically Polish as a sham, calling him a Jew lover, and hinting at atrocities committed during the war. It was not until after we had left that I learned that the black eye patch he wore was the result of Polish villagers' retribution for the crimes of his father during the war. I had no idea what those crimes may have been but the trauma they created seemed to haunt the village. More than thirty years later I read reports of the pogroms that occurred in

⁵⁶ Kapuściński (1993:95-108) describes how the people of the city listened as a series of explosions reduced the giant structure to rubble, leaving 'a terrifying silence' and a 'heavy cloud of dust and smoke'.

this area during the war, where villagers assisted in the mass shooting and burial of Jews.

In *Otherland* (2012), Tumarkin revisits the Babi Yar Ravine in the Ukraine with her teenage daughter, who remarks that the place looks 'beautiful'. Tumarkin is horrified by this response and recounts the terrifying history of Babi Yar, one of the *Einsatzgruppen's* most well known killing sites. The active suppression of any documentation of the events that occurred there, and the disrespect exhibited toward the many thousands who lay buried in the ravine, echoes the fate of other such sites in the former Soviet Union, including the place where my grandmother is buried.

Carolyn Kraus (2008) writes of her journey to discover the place where her grandmother was taken after the Nazi occupation of Vienna. A place called Maly Trostinets, outside Minsk in Belarus, which was a Nazi-occupied state in the Soviet Union. From her research she discovers that between 1941 and 1943 there were executed in Maly Trostinets:

More than 200,000 souls, including Partisans, Soviets soldiers, at least 60,000 Belorussian Jewish prisoners from the Minsk Ghetto, and – according to wildly varying estimates – between forty and eighty thousand foreign Jews transported from concentration camps of Germany, Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

(Kraus 2008:259)

These figures are later revised upwards, by a Russian film maker she meets, who tells her it was a place that was also used by the Soviet secret police to bury the victims of Stalin's purges. The Soviets suppressed the Nazi massacre to conceal their own crimes and allowed the killing field to become the rubbish dump for the city of Minsk. The truth or accuracy of the estimates of how many victims actually lie beneath the mountains of trash is of less significance than the pile of rubbish that is now dumped over their memory.

Tumarkin tells a similar tale of how the Soviet regime attempted to eradicate the ravine at Babi Yar with catastrophic consequence. The ravine, where thousands were buried, was turned into a dam that was filled with slimy sludge from a nearby factory; the dam burst killing thousands of people, not hundreds as officially reported (2005:253), who lived downstream of the deluge. An atrocity was orchestrated upon an earlier atrocity compounding the trauma of the landscape.

Zmievskaya Balka, where my grandmother and her sisters are buried has also become a contested site where 'official' versions of history seek to rename the truth of what was done there.

What typology does a second generation writer employ in developing a narrative about such 'practiced places' (De Certeau, 1988) that continue to haunt the psyche? Babi Yar and Maly Trostinets are both places where thousands of people are buried without ceremony or dignity. Tumarkin and Kraus have a connection with the traumascapes they visit. They have relatives there, a cousin and grandmother respectively. They feel the space differently to the thousands, for example, who flock to Auschwitz and environs in search of an authentic experience. I read their narratives (and there are many others like them) to locate my own experience within a broader narrative, within a historical context that might aggregate these examples into some kind of body of knowledge and understanding.

Browning (2003) explains his process in working with survivor testimonies in *Collected Memories* where he aggregates verifiable accounts and critically analyses them. He regards this work as a vital link to compiling a comprehensive history of the Holocaust in Europe. Every story, every place, every heinous crime needs to be collated and interrogated for truth and meaning. The evidence uncovered by Dubois (2008) and his team points to a very consistent approach in the murder of Jews in the Ukraine, which became a large scale killing field. The villagers of Markopol could very well have witnessed one of these atrocities. Despite feeling absolute revulsion towards these traumascapes it was important to see the place where my grandmother was murdered.⁵⁷

Going home

Many Second Generation writers feel compelled to return to their ancestral homes. Arnold Zable writes of his compulsion to visit the ancestral home of his parents, to understand their longing and loss of a place called Bialystock in Poland, to reconcile the two worlds he seemed to inhabit as a resident of Carlton, and as the son of Holocaust survivors.

I was compelled to confront the lingering darkness. I decided to embark on a journey back to ancestral territory. I wanted to create a wholeness out of the

⁵⁷ Margalit (2002) suggests that there is an ethical requirement to remember such atrocities.

fragments, or at least see with my own eyes where my ancestors had lived for so many centuries.

(Zable, in Grinblat, 2002:134).

The seeing with one's 'own eyes' reflects the need of the embodied self to experience viscerally the 'practiced space' of the parent's home, to make their experience real, to construct a narrative that seems true. While the Second Generation might want to understand the conflicted relationship their parents feel for their childhood homes, a return to that place does not always provide illumination. The stories of home that parents pass on to their children inevitably describe places that are lost in history. The places they remember, more often than not, are infused with mythological images, drenched with nostalgia and regret.

Marianne Hirsh and Leo Spitzer (2002), write of their return to Hirsch's parents' childhood home as a necessary pilgrimage, a means of understanding the ambivalent nostalgia her parents felt for a place that was also the site of stress and loss. The city of Chernowitz that her parents remembered nostalgically, 'with its Viennese-inspired architecture, avenues, parks and cafes', was a physical manifestation of a bygone Austrian imperial past. The reconciliation they sought in returning to a place for which they had conflicted memories could not be realised, because the trauma of the place remained while no trace of their former life could be recaptured. Hirsch and Spitzer suggest that children of refugees inherit their parents' suspicion for the notion of home:

And for us, in the postmemorial generation, this crossroads is – paradoxically – an index for our ambivalent and rootless nostalgia. It is less a location than a transitional space where the encounter between generations, between past and present, between nostalgic and traumatic memory, can momentarily, effervescently, be staged. The crossroads is what we have come to think of as a 'point of memory' – a point of intersection between time and space, personal and cultural recollection.

(Hirsch & Spitzer 2002:274).

In seeking out the geographic location of their parent's trauma the Second Generation or 'postmemorial' generation re-practices the space to give it their own meanings. Inherited space becomes their new practiced space.

It was only by uncovering and then standing in the exact place, in Bolechow (Bolekhiv), where his relatives were murdered that Mendelsohn found an end to his story, and with a gesture he himself could not explain:

I reached down and thrust my hands into the earth at the base of the tree and filled my pockets with it. Then – since this is the tradition of the strange tribe to which, although parts of that tradition make no sense to me, I know I belong, because my grandfather once belonged to it – I groped around in the earth for a large stone, and when I found one, I put it in the crook where the branches of the tree met. This is their only monument.

(Mendelsohn 2006:503)

The monument, the ritual, the handful of dirt are how the embodied self connects with the past, by seeing, doing, feeling, by performing ceremony in space. Krause enacts a similar ritual:

Glancing around to make sure no one was in sight, slightly embarrassed to be witnessing myself, I knelt and kissed the earth. I scooped up a kleenexful of dirt and tucked it away in my pocket. Here was something I could hold in my hand, a tangible piece of history.

(Kraus 2008:267)

The practiced space the Second Generation attempts to imagine is a discordant space. Nostalgia for home, the yearning and longing for place, is a sickness that is more complex than a simple identification with a concrete place, a piece of earth. My mother has never wanted to return, despite her longing for it.

In the early years of displacement, memory of the lost homeland may be infused with regret and sentimental longing, which is transmitted to the next generation, as Hirsch and Spitzer suggest. That sense of loss and displacement fades as time passes, as Hoffman discovered; then she was able to reconcile the two Eva's (the Cracow Eva and the Canada Eva) as parts of the one whole Eva. My parents' attitude, when they came back from their trip to Poland, seems to fit with the assimilated self that Hoffman describes. They did not bring back handfuls of earth as many of their friends did in earlier pilgrimages to Poland. Instead, they said: 'We kissed the ground when the plane touched down in Melbourne!' They found it easier to leave it all behind again, just as they had when they migrated to Australia.

My inherited longing for Rostov-na-Donu had to be resolved, so like other Second Generation writers I performed the ritual return to 'see it with my own eyes'.

22. The Return

Rostov-na-Donu, June 2010

‘I am the space where I am.’⁵⁸

In winter, when the first frosts appeared on the back lawn of our house in Moe and our breath rose like clouds of steam as we walked to school, I imagined what it would be like to walk to school in the snow – soft, dry, powdery snow rather than the icy sludge one found in the Latrobe Valley. A trip to Mt Baw Baw, the nearest snowfield to our place, was invariably a disappointment for my parents. ‘This is not real snow,’ they would lament, as they tried to brush the wet clumps of ice off their coats. Rostov-na-Donu, by contrast, was a winter fairyland, where the snow was soft and yielding, and children could glide on sleds that would fly down Budonnovsk Prospect all the way from my mother’s house to the grand River Don. In the heart of winter the river would be frozen like icy granite, a natural skating rink where my mother could skim across its surface with sweeping graceful arcs.

The tastes and smells of Rostov-na-Donu were also exotic and different. On street corners old women sold steaming *piroshky*, yeast buns filled with cabbage, mushrooms and meat, rather than the sloppy meat pies and hot dogs we’d find at the footy in Moe. The lollies were different too. My mother used to hanker after the milky white toffees she had had as a child. Even when we presented her with a version of this kind of sweet, she would hold it between her fingers and squeeze it to test its firmness, put it in her mouth, roll it around a few times, and then let it rest for a while under her tongue while the flavours merged with her saliva. Sometimes the verdict would be positive.

‘Yes, it’s good. You can taste the milk, but it’s not right. It’s not like the ones we had at home.’

The tastes and smells of home could never be replicated.

As a child, I was always curious about the Russian city my mother had come from because it appeared to be more mysterious and exotic than Poland, and certainly more so than Moe. I even loved the name, Rostov-na-Donu. Like Stratford-upon-Avon, the three words were always said together. It sounded cultured, romantic and

⁵⁸ Noël Arnaud, quoted in Bachelard (1994)

elusive, trapped as it was behind a thick iron curtain. I coveted stories of this place like precious gems, and would ask my mother to tell me more, but the stories would always be the same, fragments of a past, glimpses of a city that might no longer exist.

What puzzled me most was that although my mother so clearly loved her childhood home, she never once attempted to return. When we visited my father's family in the Ukraine she could easily have applied to go home to Rostov-na-Donu. 'There's nothing there for me,' she'd said when I asked her about it. It was a paradox I could never fathom. It was as if Rostov-na-Donu had become two cities; one lived deep within the other, each one dependent on the other for survival. The old city had been imprisoned in the shock of war, unable to free itself and reverberate with happier times, unable to ascend through memory. I had always wanted to return and reclaim my mother's lost city, to peel back the layers of time and all the traumatic events that had occurred there and rediscover the magical city of her youth, to recover her memory. I had wanted to do this with her, but she was more resistant than any iron curtain.

'No,' she says, whenever I have asked. 'It's too painful.'

I had hoped that the passage of time may have eased her fears, and that she might eventually decide to come with me. I had hoped that our revisiting of the past might have aroused her curiosity and loosened her resistance.

'Can you tell me what your house looked like?' I asked her, during one of our sessions, early in 2008, long before Victor's arrival in our lives.

'Yes, sort of, it's so long ago. I remember where I slept. It was a little alcove off the main room where there was room for a bed and a little cupboard. A curtain covered this space and gave me privacy; there was no door.'

My mother's memory has always astonished me as she remembers minute details from her past – the colour of a dress, the number of her house on Buddonovsk Prospect, street names and dates – yet other, more significant, details seem to be buried deep in her memory, unable to be raised. I attempt a visualisation exercise to see if it might help retrieve other details. I ask her to close her eyes and imagine she is back in Rostov coming home from a day at school. At first she is reluctant and giggles at the idea of closing her eyes to help her remember.

‘It’s okay. I’ll hold your hand, you won’t fall over,’ I say. ‘It’s just to help you focus so you are not distracted by what you see in this room.’ I hold her arm gently and take a step forward, she moves with me. We begin the narration.

‘We walk up Buddonovsk Prospect, until we come to Lermontovksa, we cross the road and turn right once we have crossed the road.’

I’m holding my mother by the arm, and turn her to the right. She starts laughing as I push a chair out of the way so we can both proceed down the road, in my kitchen, and I coax her to continue.

‘This is my house on the corner here, but you can’t get into the house from the front. There is no door up to our floor, only the stairs that go down into the basement workshop are there in the front. You have to walk down Lermontovska until you come to the gate.’

‘Is the gate locked?’

‘No, no, it’s not locked. You just open the latch and go in.’

‘Okay, what can you see when you come through the gate?’

‘Well, there are a few lilac trees down one side of the yard. I loved the lilac trees when they flowered in spring.’

‘How many trees are there? Are they like the ones you have now?’

‘Maybe there were two or three. They are the big ones, with lilac flowers... not the white lilac.’

‘And where is the park bench and chair that we saw in the photo of Pavel with baby Victor?’

‘Oh, just here to the right, near the trees.’ She waves her hand to the right.

‘And what else is in the yard?’

‘At the back of the yard, there is a small house where these poor people lived. It was very small, maybe two rooms. I never went in there. These people were very poor, and the boy was blind, poor thing.’

I know that she is in her backyard. She can see how it was, and the words start to flow. I haven’t heard this story before.

‘I used to sit in this garden and read my romance books, and the boy would play his accordion, even though he was blind. He was very good. A lady in the flats taught him for free because his mother couldn’t pay.’ She opens her eyes and looks at me in surprise.

‘What was his name?’

‘I don’t know,’ she mumbles, and then looks at me even more perplexed. ‘Vasily. His name was Vasily,’ she says emphatically.

His name echoes from the past.

‘What about the house, can you remember what that looked like?’

Her eyes are open now as she describes the external staircase that went down to the two basement flats, where a small woman lived on her own.

‘She was a little woman, you know... a *lilliputka*... how do you say it in English? A very small person, yes she was tiny. She read a lot of books. She was a teacher. She taught French. She was very outspoken. She was critical of everything that went on. One day she just disappeared. We didn’t know what had happened to her. People just disappeared.’

‘What was her name?’

‘Nikita... something... I don’t remember her second name.’

‘So you think Nikita was taken because she was critical of the government?’

‘Yes, you didn’t say what you thought. If you said something, someone could tell on you. It was not safe to speak your mind. She was for the tsars. Maybe she came from a rich family. I don’t know, she just disappeared one day and someone else came to live in her apartment. Ours was the one on the left on the first floor. The flat had two big rooms and a kitchen. Maybe another little room behind the kitchen, like a bathroom laundry but there was no bath, just a sink. My little space was off the main room. It wasn’t very big. But it was better than what a lot of other people had.’

A look of sheer pleasure crosses her face as she recalls these details.

‘It’s amazing’, she says, after a while, ‘how much I can still remember. This old brain still works.’ She laughs and eases herself back into the chair.

The old stories of Rostov-na-Donu, together with the ones she has just recovered still form only a fragmented image of a life and childhood home.

‘What else do you want to know? That’s enough. It’s time for a cup of tea.’

Rostov was reduced to rubble in 1943 when the city was liberated by the Russian army. Two thirds of the city’s buildings were destroyed. Incredibly, the house on the

corner of Lermontovska and Buddonovsk survived this onslaught as well as subsequent restoration and modernisation over some sixty-eight years. I can still feel the frisson I experienced when Victor sent us a series of photos of the house – photos he had taken upon each of his returns to the city. It amazes me how a city can survive the destruction of two-thirds of its buildings and half its population. Tanks have rolled through its streets firing canons, bombs have fallen, many have died, children have been orphaned, mothers have cried, the city has lost thousands, new citizens have been born, communism has fallen, industry has thrived, some have prospered, and the mighty river Don still continues to flow quietly through the city to the Sea of Azov.

Now I am here, in this city that I have resurrected from the ephemeral world of memory and dreams. The heat of the sun on my face, and the steamy humidity, is unexpected as we alight from the train and step onto the platform. It's June in southern Russia, early summer, but the heat is surprising in a country I mostly associate with ice, snow, big woollen coats and fur hats. I had not anticipated this clammy stickiness that seems to have sprung from my pores. I am in the city of my mother's childhood, wanting to excavate time like an archaeologist, peel back layers of the past and rediscover the lost city of my mother's childhood, to experience a landscape that has existed only in stories. I have this sketch of the place in my mind and now I want to feel it with all my senses. I want to join the dots, fill in the gaps with colour, and play with the subtleties of light and shade. I want to visit their beloved house, walk through the botanic gardens, dip my toes in the River Don, and eat steaming *piroshky* from a roadside vendor. I want to remember every moment, capture it in film and word so I can take it home to Australia, and tell my mother a story of how it felt to be in the place where she once was a child.

I have come with Victor, the brother my mother thought she would never see again, my partner David, and met up with my nephew Troy, who has flown in from London. Victor has been restless since waking this morning. The train had gently rocked its way overnight across the steppes from Moscow to Rostov-na-Donu. We woke to the sight of the river, wending its way ahead of us, and joined the other passengers standing in line along the corridor to see the villages that appeared from the plains like mirages, bathed in the morning light. When we reached Likhaya, some

200 kilometres from Rostov-na-Donu, Victor leaned into me and pointed to the village that lay beyond the station.

‘I lived in an orphanage just down the road there,’ he said softly. ‘We used to escape on this same train and travel all the way into Rostov. No one ever caught us.’

Victor is coming home, and the weight of memories he has held onto for so long, captured in poems, songs and letters, has filled our compartment, the corridor of the carriage, and seeped into my being.

By the time we reach the hotel I can feel Victor’s impatience, he is holding back a torrent of words he knows I will not fully understand. His eyes are darting from one corner of the lobby to another. Things have changed. Refurbishments have happened since he was last here. He is anxious for us to get booked in, to dump our bags and have our showers, so we can go as quickly as possible to his old home, to see again the place of his lost childhood.

‘It will rain soon. We must hurry.’

But then he draws me to one side, arm around my shoulders and points to the other end of the lobby.

‘There was a barbershop here once. It was just down that hallway over there past the reception desk. There was a wall, a corridor down there, and at the end was a barber’s shop,’ he says, his eyes alive with memory, his body tingling with electricity.

‘I sat so still and silently. I was scared of the barber!’

Victor adopts the stance of a little boy trapped in a barber’s chair: knuckles white from clutching the armrest, jaw locked in a grimace. He has been transported back to that moment. I have seen this little boy before. A six-year-old child stands on a chair, dressed in neat white shirt and shorts, hand clutching the back of the chair, his determined gaze and grimacing mouth are set like stone in a sweet face framed by sharply cut, short blond hair. I wonder now if that photograph was taken after one such excursion to this hotel. I don’t have the language to tell my own story about the terror of barbers in white coats, but demonstrate that I have understood his with laughter and a comforting pat on the shoulder.

‘We also came here to buy ice cream!’ he continues, now in full performance mode. ‘The man would slop the ice cream on thin wafers. You had to eat quickly holding your hand like this...’

Victor is a child again, cupping a flimsy wafer precariously in both hands. Then he adopts the forlorn expression of a child whose ice cream has escaped and landed on the floor below.

'Plop! It happened like that once.'

We laugh together. He is home again. Hotel Rostov is just down the road from 111 Budonnovsk Prospect, opposite my mother's old high school. The mere idea of being so close to the house that my mother and Victor have remembered so vividly, to stay in the street that she had walked down so many times in her youth, to be in the hotel directly opposite the High School she had attended, to be inside the stories I have been told, and inside Victor's memory is quite overwhelming.

Both brother and sister spoke of the house on Budonnovsk Prospect with a mystical fervour and longing.

'I remember the kitchen,' my mother exclaimed. 'Exactly how the table and chairs were. I can see it. And then there was the lounge room with big chairs, and the telephone on top of the cupboard.'

'Do you remember the jar of crackers that always stood in the corner, and the big jar of sour cherries we had with tea that stood under that little table?'

My mother didn't recall that detail, and I could see Victor's face slump. He so wanted her to remember his memories. The emotion each expressed for their home however was identical.

Nevertheless, Victor's memories of this place are far stronger than my mother's. While she has clung to selected images, Victor has retained an unabridged album of memories.

We set off up the road to visit the house. When I catch sight of it across the busy street from the opposite corner of Lermontovska and Budonnovsk, I recognise it as if it were my own childhood home, except it looks shabbier than in the photos we have seen and somehow smaller, dwarfed as it is by heavy traffic and towering apartments that now overshadow it. In the black-and-white photographs we had seen of the house, which were taken in the early eighties, the building seemed more imposing, as the modern high-rise apartments had not yet been built. A two-storey terrace, in a turn-of-the-century style, it was designed to sit elegantly on the corner, with its decorative front facade set on an angle. An ornate cupola with a gargoyle perched on the roof, above a wrought iron balcony with French doors on the second

level, while a long rectangular window balanced the composition on the ground floor. The eastern wall of the building on the Buddonovsk side joined a set of terraces that ran up the street. The building, once a fine example of the classical architecture of its time, has been modified over the years with the apartment they had lived in being transformed into a shop, a small milk bar that sells drinks, sweets and some groceries. Its entrance is now framed by an ugly awning, which clashes with the antique fretwork on the building. Victor's disdain for these modifications was palpable in his email descriptions – 'Our beautiful house is destroyed', he had lamented.

We cross the street. My first impulse is to call my mother in Australia. Her phone in the hallway of her Moe home rings, then her voice comes down the line – as clearly as if she were just down the road.

'Hello, Mum, I'm in Rostov-na-Donu.'

'Oh, hi,' she says, and I imagine her fumbling for the remote, ready to turn down the television that I can hear in the background.

'I'm standing on the corner of Lermontovska, outside No 111 Buddonovsk Prospect.' My words are well rehearsed.

'Oh my god, don't say that. You'll give me a heart attack. I'm shaking already.'

These words are also expected. I have long ago learned not to interpret such remarks too literally, but I can hear the emotion in her voice and know that she is excited. Her next words are also anticipated.

'Just let me turn the television down. I can't hear you.'

The global roaming counter on my mobile phone account ticks over while I wait for her return.

'Is Troy with you too?'

The phone conversation is important. I want her to be here, at least for a moment, to confront her fear of returning to this place, of actually feeling her past and everything it represents. Everyone in our party understands the symbolism of the moment.

We are here to take those steps down Lermontovska, towards the side entrance. The gate is closed, but Victor pushes it open and enters the yard. There are no lilac trees, no garden bench and chairs, no paving, no little shack where the poor people lived. The yard is grubby and unkempt, cut in half by a fence to accommodate a tin

shed on the other side. Victor attempts to construct an inventory of what has changed, but when he points to the stairs leading up to the entrance of their apartment his eyes glaze over and his voice catches. I realise that my mother would struggle with the emotion of the moment. Victor has been here before, he has seen the gradual decay, but it is evidently still painful for him. Remembering has been a lifelong mission for him, an imperative in holding on to the memories of a family life that was brutally cut short, by the events of 1942, and made him an orphan at seven years of age. These memories kept him warm.

We are intruders in the backyard of those who live in this building sixty-eight years on, yet we take photographs of the staircase, and ourselves on it, as well as a close-up shot of the backdoor, as if we are about to grab hold of the handle and enter. This is all we can do – capture ourselves in the present in order to remember the past. Victor asks to be photographed standing outside a window on Lermontovska. An odd choice I think, to have oneself photographed in front of a non-descript barred window, though it must have some significance for it is the same position we have seen in other photos – as a younger man in 1976, then in 1984, in 1996, and now again in 2010, perhaps the last visit, always in front of this same window. As he stands there posing for the photograph, leaning one hand on the wall, Victor begins to tell us another story, the story of his window.

There was one day when his father had locked the keys inside the apartment. The small panel at the top of the window was slightly ajar, and the only person small enough to fit through the space was little Victor. His father had hoisted him up high to enter through the opening and Victor had climbed into the room, retrieved the keys and exited through the back steps we had just photographed – the old panelled window has been replaced by this new window, covered with bars, to prevent precisely such an entry. We photograph the man in front of the window that is no longer there, in order to recapture a moment, to keep alive the memory of that day when the child was a hero. This house still contains the daydreams of a little boy, his big sister, and their memory of a family that was shattered by war. They have left this image of themselves behind.

We walk the surrounding streets oblivious to the shower of rain that provides relief from the sticky heaviness of the air. We walk to the kindergarten along the same footpath Lena escorted Victor each morning, holding his hand tightly until he

was safely in the care of his teachers. Victor seems to remember more than is possible for a little boy to retain. He has crafted these memories, sewn them into the seams of his psyche and replenished them with deduction and speculation. Yet his memories seem to correspond with the images Lena created for us in Australia.

This city that was reduced to rubble has been transformed, but the layout of streets has stayed the same. The old orphanage has been restored and is painted a pale pink with decorative white window frames. Victor poses casually, arms folded, legs crossed at the front door of the building smiling into our camera. The paths we follow intersect with the past, beyond the post-war reconstruction and the insertion of the high-density, twenty storey apartments of more modern times. I ask David to take a photo of the decaying windowsill on one of the formerly beautiful old buildings, a symbol of a past that is rapidly disappearing

Each moment in this city seems to be imbued with ritualistic significance – walking down Lermontovska, entering the garden, buying sweets for my mother, in a shop that was once her home, hoping to replicate her milk toffees. The sights, sounds, smells, textures, conversations and thoughts connect me with a past I never lived. I am constructing a narrative, taking photos, and remembering quotes that I hope will bring happier moments from the past to share with my mother. Not everything was destroyed, and her brother not only survived but also turned out to be a good person – rather than the spoilt brat she remembered. I am trying to rewrite my mother's past, to reclaim the stories we were never told.

My eyes seek meaning in the contour of a wall, gate or awning, looking for an image that will capture the essence of Rostov-na-Donu. We notice that many of the streets are potholed and unmaintained. Even the more modern buildings are in need of repair. The majority of the residents of Rostov today live in multi story apartment blocks that seem to be springing up all over the city. Some of the grand and ornate public buildings, especially the churches, have been rebuilt to emulate the glory days of the turn of the century architecture. Rostov-na-Donu is trying to project an image of itself as a vibrant cosmopolitan hub, a gateway port to the Caucasus and the lands bordering the Black Sea.

We walk along the banks of the river Don, looking for a place to sit down at one of the floating taverns to sample genuine Russian beer. We pass by a bronze maiden who stretches her arms to the breeze that wafts along the spring shoreline of the

river, oblivious to the passing crowds. Her face is serene and her eyes look dreamily into the distance. The folds of her cotton gown suggest a gust of wind has pressed the flimsy fabric against her breasts and hips and lifted her hair to give it the appearance of a thousand patriotic flags that fly over her shoulders and stream down her back. She is larger than memory, stronger than death, standing proudly on the banks of the river Don, where the floating taverns offer everything but the Russian beer we hope to sample. The goddess of the river invites us to drink in the magic of tourism, but I cannot dip my feet in its waters as my mother once did. The river is filled with the sludge of barges and boats that emit a putrid smell.

‘You can’t put your feet in that! It’s black.’

‘Maybe it’s cleaner on the other side?’ I still want to fulfil my promise to my mother that I will dip my feet in the river for her.

‘I think we would have to go many kilometres upstream, to find clean water.’

I have no memory of Rostov-na-Donu. I don’t remember its slippery sidewalks in spring as the ice melted and turned everything to sludge. I have no memory of autumn winds and biting rain, of snow falling on rooftops, of bombs carpeting the city, tanks that invaded children’s play spaces, or a time when one could still swim in the river. I want to imagine what it was like, without having been there, like an interloper in other people’s dreams, nightmares and longing for home. I want to feel what it might have been like to live in this city seventy years ago. The old city is submerged in the enemy that is time, in progress, change and reconstruction, and in the flashing lights of modernity. My mother’s Rostov-na-Donu lives on within all these layers.

The city has a history, and documents to prove it. Our trip to the archives reveals more than we can understand about the enigmatic Elisaveta Bogdanovich and her dashing Polack, Pavel Bogdanovich. The image of Elisaveta and Pavel as young lovers reclining in the park is ever present in my mind as I examine the duplicates of her marriage and divorce certificate.

‘Married 29th May 1928, divorced 28 June 1928. They married again on the 8th May, 1935, just 10 days before Victor’s birth. It doesn’t make sense.’ I am incredulous.

‘Hardly a shotgun wedding. They must have had a fiery relationship,’ Troy laughs.

David, our resident expert on Jewish religious lore, offers a Midrashic explanation.

‘According to Jewish lore, a rabbi will only grant a woman a divorce if the husband agrees. If the husband doesn’t agree the woman can’t get a divorce, so she can’t remarry.’

‘But Elisaveta could have had a civil divorce,’ I counter.

‘That’s right, she probably did, but in the eyes of Jewish law she would still have been married to Gregory Tigay, if he hadn’t agreed to a divorce.’

‘Yes, and we know that he was a drunken womaniser and a nasty piece of work.’

‘Anyway, her family would have hit the roof if she’d come home and said she’d married Pavel, a Polack goy⁵⁹ what’s more. They would have given her hell.’ David is in full swing: finally an opportunity to put eleven years of Jewish studies to good use.

We are jointly constructing a Midrashic to explain a month long marriage between two people who, as far as we know, lived together in the same house for the years leading up to the birth of their son.

‘Mum told me recently that her grandmother had lived with them for a while, but that she was causing problems between them. Pavel had given Elisaveta an ultimatum: “It’s her or me.”’

‘What sort of problems was she causing?’

‘Well, apparently she was always speaking to Elisaveta in Yiddish, which Pavel didn’t understand, which really annoyed him. Also, she was suggesting that he was unfaithful. Pavel worked in the theatre so he was often out at night. Elisaveta’s mum was doing some classic undermining.’

‘Exactly,’ David enthuses. ‘Even if Elisaveta was a member of the Communist Party, and was trying to move away from the religious practices, her family would still have been adhering to the law. It would have caused huge problems with the family.’

‘Well, obviously there’s more to the story. I guess we will never know.’

Victor has not been able to follow the conversation, but I intimate that we have been talking about the reasons why Elisaveta and Pavel might have married and then divorced within a month.

⁵⁹ A ‘Goy’ is a non Jewish person

Wrestling with the bones: The return

Victor taps the side of his head, and says, 'They were cunning people. They had a reason. Something to do with the Party, I bet.'

Victor has his own Midrashic explanation – a shrug.

23. *Zmievskaya Balka*: the Snake's Ravine

Rostov-na-Donu, June 2010

'Together we became that grief.'⁶⁰

I see a hand silhouetted against grey skies, palms open, fingers spread, shooting out from a straight square arm that is stretched to the sky. Another hand overlaps this arm at the elbow, like a cross that has been cut in half. I see a woman, hewn from stone, standing to attention, her left arm thrust upwards in a gesture that cries *Stop!* and *Help!* simultaneously. I see her right arm shielding her face, which stares impassively ahead. Below her are those she seeks to protect. A young girl clutches the woman's hip, a man crouches at her feet arms stretched forward as if being pulled, his wrists bound with rope made of stone. Beside him another figure is slumped, raised on one arm, with the left hand pressed against her face, which is filled with despair. Each figure is alone in their terror, fused together in one giant boulder of concrete. Their merged state reflects the tangle of bodies that lie beneath the blanket of earth and grass that is draped over this mass grave. Silence descends upon our group. We have arrived at *Zmievskaya Balka*, the Snake's Ravine, the place where 27,000 mostly Jewish people were murdered, by Nazi soldiers and their helpers, in August 1942. One of those 27,000 people was my grandmother, Elisaveta Bogdanovich (nee Nodel).

We have come to experience the place, to bear witness, to pay our respects and to make a physical connection with this one person: my grandmother, my mother's mother, my nephew's great-grandmother, my uncles' mother. We are joined by ancestral blood and whatever else it is that binds us as a result of our interconnected gene pools. We are family. It is not until we arrive at our destination and Alexie climbs out of the other taxi, clutching a dozen red roses in his hand, that I realise that he is part of our family also. Elisaveta's sister, Alexandra, is also buried in the ravine. Troy and Alexie are both here to honour their great grandmothers.

Sophia (Alexie's grandmother) Victor, Lena (Troy's grandmother) and Valentin were the surviving children of the three Nodel sisters: Elisaveta, Bella and Alexandra, who are buried together in this mass grave on the outskirts of the city. As children,

⁶⁰ Milo De Angelis (1999) <http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/mute-map> (Accessed 2014)

my mother and Victor knew very little of these aunts and cousins, who were estranged from Elisaveta as a result of her marriage to the 'Polack' as they referred to her husband, whose very name they were unable to utter. As the descendants of the key players in this family feud, we are, in a curious way, healing old wounds by reconciling the family.

Standing on the observation deck that overlooks the ravine, I sense Victor's impatience, as if *Zmievszkaya Balka* is just another destination on the Rostov-na-Donu agenda, to be mentally ticked off once completed. We will see the Rostov he remembers, that he imagines Lena remembers, and wants me to see.

'Now we go to *Zmievszkaya Balka* and lay flowers for Elisaveta,' he had informed us, as a matter of fact, as we piled into the taxis parked outside the hotel. Now he is already halfway down the sweeping path as I gingerly make my way forward, uncertain of what to feel.

The laying of flowers at this site was a ritual he had performed on all visits to his childhood home. Each of his four wives had come here in turn to fulfil this particular rite, and to bear witness to his loss. I wonder if this ritual laying of flowers, like many such rituals, serves to provide a distance from the reality of the events which occurred here – events in which Victor and my mother could easily have been both witness and victim. The symbolic act of the return, the laying of flowers, bowed heads and silent thoughts, is an attempt to give meaning to a place and time we can never really comprehend. The pull of Rostov-na-Donu, my mother's lost childhood home, has been powerful throughout my life. This ravine provides another kind of pull altogether – a compulsion fraught with obligation, curiosity and trepidation.

Despite my need to come and perform the ethical imperative of remembrance, I had no preconceptions of what the site might look like, or where we might lay flowers, and no real idea of what I might feel other than sadness and revulsion. I have read so much about the mass shootings of innocent people throughout Eastern Europe I wonder if I will be able to feel anything at all. I have been anesthetised by the horror, stunned by the barbaric nature of the actions of those who were able to abandon all sense of humanity and perform unspeakably cruel and sadistic deeds upon fellow human beings.

The sculpture is a surprise because it is not typical of the other statues and monuments I have seen in the Russian Federation. The Soviets were fond of erecting

grand monuments and architectural giants that reflected the glory of the nation. Everywhere we looked in Moscow, amongst the burgeoning reconstruction of the 'new' Russia, we saw monuments that proudly proclaim the great Soviet nation's warriors, workers and cultural heroes (including many small and large figures of Lenin, which still populate the country), alongside larger than life statues of a host of writers, poets and musicians who represent the collective cultural history of the nation. This sculpture is different in size, style and complexity in its rough-hewn, almost unfinished, appearance. It dominates the landscape and I am transfixed by its intensity, drawn to this woman who exudes such strength and composure in the face of her imminent annihilation. Is this how Elisaveta faced her death, with grim pride and stoic resignation?

The memorial site has its own story to tell. Immediately after the war the Soviets excavated the site and counted the bodies, a gruesome task in itself. They erected a standard Soviet monument: two Russian soldiers made of bronze posing in battle mode under a Victory banner. On the 9th of May (Victory Day) in 1974, a memorial complex was installed with the words 'In memory of the victims of fascism in *Zmievskaia Balka*'. The nationality of the victims was not specified. In September 2004, the mayor of the city signed a decree on the opening of a memorial commemorative plaque with the following inscription:

On 11-12 August 1942 the occupying Nazi forces annihilated more than 27 thousand Jews. It is the largest memorial to the Holocaust in Russia.

The Soviet city officially recognised that genocide of the Jewish people had occurred on the outskirts of Rostov-na-Donu, at the Snake's Ravine on the edge of the botanical gardens, near a railway siding where few people lived. Almost seventy years later, the Jewish community of Rostov is picking over the bones of the past in order to give a name to each person buried in this mass grave. The Remembering Rostov website calls on families to name their dead.⁶¹ The only real witnesses to these events, however, are the people who lived alongside the ravine, who were ordered to lock up their homes, surrender their keys and leave the area. Most complied, but many then hid in the bushes around the ravine, some from curiosity, and others in fear that their homes might be requisitioned or damaged. They saw

⁶¹ <http://www.rememberingrostov.com/>

everything that happened in that place, and it is their accounts that informed Ehrenberg and Grossman's (1980) *The Black Book* to become the 'community of memory'.⁶²

According to the Russian website where the monuments of Rostov are explained, the figure of the woman in the sculpture is intended as a symbol of the motherland, a mother who stands tall and strong to inspire her children to withstand the struggle against death in the face of the Nazi invasion. At her feet are her children, the Russian people, fossilised in concrete. Like Lot's wife they looked into the face of evil and were turned to stone, but for them it was not the result of a wistful last glance. The monument is therefore symbolic of the motherland's victory, rather than a prayer for the dead. I am struggling to understand this aspect of the landscape. The nationalist pride in the great patriotic struggle against the external enemy overshadows the horrific nature of the atrocities committed here and elsewhere throughout the Soviet Union. The death of more than twenty-five million Russians throughout this great patriotic war appears to be celebrated in the name of nationhood – the price of freedom from an external oppressor.

The ravine provides a striking natural backdrop to the memorial complex, with its visually powerful broad sweeps of paving on either side that lead down to the central 'altar' where the eternal flame 'beats' within a metal wreath set into the circular platform. It is here that flowers can be laid. Along the right hand path there are five six-metre brick pylons wedged into the side of the ravine. Each has an inscription that refers to the grim years of the 'Great Patriotic War':

The first pylon reads: 'Arise, huge country, get up to mortal combat.'

The second pylon is more instructive: 'All for the front, everything for victory!'

The third is shrill: 'Fight to the death! Not one step back! This is the order of the motherland.'

The fourth wearily proclaims: 'We will not release the sword from his hand until the total destruction of fascism.'

Finally, the fifth states: 'Our cause is just – we won.'

⁶² We were unaware at the time that controversy still surrounded the site. The museum was closed until further information. I discussed the changing historical representations in an earlier chapter, but include this information here as it represents what was known when we were there.

Victory is proclaimed. It seems to me that the whole site is dedicated to championing the type of Soviet propaganda that might now, in the context of the post-Soviet era, be considered both comical and tragic, but it resonates strongly with the rhetoric of Elisaveta's letter and her exhortations to her brother to fight for their great country.⁶³

The return to Rostov is a post-war ritual, something I am driven to do both out of curiosity and in my duty as the daughter of a survivor. I am here searching for evidence, for some remnant of the past, for some symbol that would make this place real, confirm my understanding that Elisaveta is indeed buried here in the ravine, along with the 26,999 others who perished. What sort of proof or confirmation would suffice? Will being in the place bring me closer to the grandmother I never knew, help me to understand who she was and how she spent her final hours?

I have read the eyewitness accounts in *The Black Book* of those who saw truckloads of people, some of whom they knew, leaving the bridge at Rostov-na-Donu, trundling up the hill to an unknown destination. I had heard my mother's account also, always the same retelling like she had cemented it in her mind. Her mother would not let her come to the 'work camp'. She had swept her aside and told the man at the registration desk:

'No, she is not Nodel. She is from my second marriage, Bogdanovich. She's not coming.'

This story that replays on a loop of limited information is all I have to paint a picture of what might have happened. The history books have told me that in Rostov-na-Donu, unlike in many other places, people who bore the word 'Jewish' as their nationality were ordered to report with all of their family members, even if they were not Jewish. Elisaveta and Pavel had disregarded that order. My mother does not recall the exact wording of the public notice, but she remembers her parents discussing the pros and cons of not reporting at the designated time. Finally, Elisaveta had decided to pack a small suitcase and report to the military offices in town.

⁶³ Carleton (2010:137) argues that 'Victory in death is no oxymoron in Russian culture but a pronounced feature of its representation of the military, linked to Christian and other historical roots.' He suggests it is a template for national identity that permeates the cultural products of that country to this day.

‘I had better go, or else they might come and take all of us,’ her mother had said.

The story of how my mother had accompanied Elisaveta to the registration point, of how close she had come to being on that truck with her mother, of how she had hugged her mother and watched her clamber onto a seat, how she had waved goodbye, is one that I return to time and again, seeking to better understand what happened in those last hours of Elisaveta’s life. Her actions are those of a woman, who knew more than she was willing to tell her daughter. I wonder if she had heard of the other massacres that had occurred throughout the Ukraine. My mother’s account of Elisaveta’s exchange with the man at the registration desk is filled with resentment both towards the man for doing his job and towards her mother for not allowing her to go with her.

From many conversations with her about this event, it appears that my mother has never analysed the moment from the perspective of an informed adult. It is as if her memory of herself in that moment is sealed in stone, impenetrable and therefore un-examinable. I now see her denial as a wilful act of self-preservation. By clinging to the perspective of her seventeen-year-old self, by not examining that moment from an informed adult perspective, she has avoided the conclusion that any reasonable person might have drawn – her mother did not survive. She has not wanted to know the truth preferring, instead, to cling tenaciously to the idea of a miracle, the idea that somehow her mother was rescued and survived. Even when I was quite young I found that interpretation difficult to believe, so in a sense I was complicit in that act of denial. The story that her mother and stepfather did not really care about her solidified that perspective. As the dearly loved daughter, I provided atonement for Elisaveta’s perceived neglect of her daughter and, unwittingly, validated my mother’s justification for closing the door on her life in Rostov-na-Donu.

We now know that the truck was destined for this ravine on the outskirts of town. There was no work camp. The work had already been done; Russian prisoners of war had been forced to dig several large pits within the ravine. The people who were brought here over a period of three days were asked to undress and leave their clothes and belongings in a pile. The children were separated from their parents and had a poisonous yellow cream smeared on their lips before being thrown, still alive, into the pit. The sound of machine gun fire continued for days.

While there are detailed eyewitness accounts of other such atrocities throughout the Ukraine, particularly the graphic details of Babi Yar (Anatoli 1976), little information is available about this event at Rostov-na-Donu. In a volume filled with accounts of atrocities perpetrated throughout Russia, *The Black Book* contains only two short entries about Rostov-na-Donu. There appear to have been no survivors.

Much information is available about the industrial style death camps that the Nazi's established in their bid to rid Europe of all Jews through their 'final solution' – with Auschwitz becoming a kind of shrine to the Holocaust in Europe. Less well known are the stories of millions of people who were simply bundled into cattle trucks, taken out of town and shot, bullet by bullet, each person targeted through the scope of one man's gun. While these murders targeted the most vulnerable – women, children, the aged and infirm – there was little effort made initially to follow up reports of the mass murder of civilians, of the genocide of the Jewish people.

The scar that remains on the outskirts of Rostov-na-Donu has now been named and memorialised. It is an official site of trauma where ritualised pilgrimages can occur, where descendants can congregate and mourn the loss of their ancestors. How is one meant to stand in a mass graveyard where there are no neat rows, no discrete plots of land, no tombstones, no names, epitaphs or stories of those whose remains lie beneath the earth? Who are the people who came here en masse, believing their destination was a work camp? What happened here, how did the events unfold? I feel like I'm standing in an ancient outdoor coliseum, where the game that was played defies imagination. What am I meant to feel, here in this place where, sixty-eight years ago, my grandmother was forced to take off her clothes and stand naked in a queue, waiting for her turn to be shot and fall into a grave where others have fallen before her, with perhaps thousands more waiting behind her frozen in terror?

The sheer numbers killed are incomprehensible; a football crowd at an MCG grand final match in Melbourne is all I can visualise. I can't imagine what it would be like to have so many terrified and naked men, women and children in one place. Nothing in my life experience has prepared me for such a moment, to be standing on a piece of land soaked in the blood of so many. I can feel the weight of history under my feet as I walk toward the eternal flame in the centre of the ravine.

Dubois (2008) provides graphic accounts of atrocities carried out in the Ukraine in the first sweeps of the *Einsatzgruppen's* three-pronged attack on the Ukraine, and then Russia. The consistency of the stories from one site to the next adds credibility to what otherwise seem like unbelievable stories. 'Everywhere, from east to west, north to south, the witnesses always ended their testimonies by muttering: "The pit moved for three days"' (123).

It is this image that has most terrified me – the idea that one bullet does not necessarily kill a person. Thousands would have died an agonising death, in pits filled with dead and dying fellow human beings, buried alive in a sea of bloodied bodies that fused into each other. Dubois explains that a 'One Jew – One bullet' policy applied, and that the killing squads were under strict orders to conserve ammunition. Some, however, did miraculously manage to crawl out of such pits and survived to tell their tales. It is these stories that are foremost in my mind as I try to make meaning of this place, but I am unable to connect with the horror and fully accept what it means.

A young woman appears over the hill, pushing a pram along the path that sweeps around the ravine. Her step doesn't falter as she passes by the concrete monument that dominates the landscape. She seems oblivious to the nature of the place, the circular trough of rounded grassy mounds, which has the appearance of undulating waves. I shudder at the thought of what the unevenness of the surface represents. The sky is clearing, and the grass is verdant in the sunshine as I watch her figure disappear from view. We congregate around the eternal flame in the centre of the ravine. There are no words written on this altar, but the four floral wreaths already present indicate that someone has been there before us – perhaps in prayer. They may be part of the Victory Day memorial services that took place across the country a few days earlier.

Each of us carefully places a rose beside the wreaths already there, fulfilling a symbolic gesture of grieving. There is no conversation. There is nothing to say. Our eyes scan the site, while David's camera lens tries to capture the different perspectives of the sculpture that stands on the southern edge of the ravine. I welcome the sun's rays on my damp head only now aware of how wet I am from the shower of rain. My feet are walking away from the eternal flame and floral wreaths. Each of us is alone in our conception of the place. We walk back slowly to stand

again before the monument, before the hands bound with stone and the woman crumpled in terror. I look up to the woman standing tall and erect, her arm raised high, and try to imagine what it means to be the mother of Russia, to bear witness to the killing field. I feel hollow, without emotion, no closer to Elisaveta's memory, and unable to shed a tear for my mother's sake.

Victor is already heading back up the pathway towards the waiting taxis. We have performed the ritual but there has been no ceremony, no prayer or speech or song, and certainly no chanting of the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead. We make our way back up the hill, past the pillars of war, to the waiting taxis. I feel we have left nothing of ourselves here. The past calls us back like a nagging ache, but I have no voice to reply.

I think I'd like to go back to *Zmievskaia Balka*,' Troy says, the next day after we have finished our work at the public records office. 'I don't feel like we really spent enough time there. It was a bit rushed.'

At first Victor is resistant to the idea, but he bows to the unanimity of our desire to return and spend some more reflective time in the space. It is unlikely that there will be other pilgrimages to Rostov-na-Donu in the future. Once again we bump our way out to *Zmievskaia Balka* to see, as if for the first time, the compelling salute of Mother Russia. After twenty-four hours in this southern Russian city, and after sitting by the river Don and absorbing its watery spirit, I feel more able to stand in the centre of the ravine and recreate the scenes that occurred here sixty-eight years ago. The buzz of whipper snippers splinters the warm midday air and we watch as two men carefully ease their way down the sides of the ravine, swinging their motorised scythes from side to side. The wail of the machines provides an appropriate soundscape for reveries on the place.

This time there are no red roses, no distancing rituals, and still no conversation. We are each of us alone with our thoughts. I circle the edge of the platform and look into the gully, trying to visualise the drop or the roll down the slope. What does a person think when they know they are about to be shot? How long did Elisaveta wait for her turn? How did she stand in her nakedness? What did she feel? Did she remember those last moments with her daughter, how deliberately had she steeled

herself to betray no emotion? Did she maintain her dignity in the face of death, or did she plead with her captors? I hope her bullet was merciful.

I think of my mother's stoicism in the face of her husband's death, and then her son's. I am always surprised by the calmness of her external demeanour, her quiet resignation and acceptance of loss. And now, it is my turn to feel. This is it. I am here. The place where my grandmother's bones lie tangled with the bones of thousands of others.

Victor is sitting on the ground near the statue. He is no longer rushing to the next destination. We have sabotaged his agenda, asserted our right to try and feel something. He stands and walks towards me, his shoulders even more stooped than usual. I recognise my mother in him. He is taller but with the same curve to his back. His face is wet with tears as he stands before me, and I glimpse for a moment the face of the child we have seen in photos.

'We could have been here,' he says slowly. 'Lena and me, we could have tasted that yellow cream on our lips.' He wipes his eyes with a handkerchief, taps the side of his head as if trying to understand. 'And I wonder what she was thinking just before she died.'

'She would have been happy that you were not here.'

I am frustrated again by the limitations of my Russian language skills. I place my hand on his seventy-four-year-old back, and try to comfort the little boy who, at the tender age of seven, lost his mother, his sister, and then his father.

Together we become that grief.

24. Writing the Psyche: the Impenetrable Wound

*'I am that I am.'*⁶⁴

We have passed through the valley of death, the ravine that became a wound in the landscape, and confronted the unspeakable horror that occurred there. We turn now to the deepest and most impenetrable of all ravines, the puzzling world of the psyche. I want to add one final layer of complexity to the possibilities or, rather, impossibilities, for arriving at the truth in this thesis. I return to some of the questions that were posed when the curtain was first raised, to address the complexities of individual psyches, and the impact that traumatic experience might have played in the lives of our subjects.

The issue of trauma, and traumatic inheritance, has been an underlying theme in many of the stories in this thesis. References to my mother's childhood abuse, life threatening accident, loss of her family, home, country, language, culture, uterus, husband, breast and son, leave us with little doubt that she has experienced significant trauma in her life. The trauma she experienced during World War II was experienced by many people, and resulted in a collectively experienced wound (Fromm 2012). It is impossible to now quantify the damage of those years on my mother's already traumatised self. The older woman describes her seventeen-year-old self when she left home as being shy, withdrawn and fearful of all men. One can only imagine that keeping one's Jewish identity a secret in Nazi Germany must have caused enormous psychological stress, let alone in addition to the experience of war, deprivation, and the accompanying displacement and uncertainty. When my parents arrived in Australia in 1950 there was little public understanding or acknowledgement of the traumatised state of many migrants; a fact that has since been acknowledged in studies of the migrant experience.⁶⁵

The extent to which the children of traumatised migrants may have inherited vestiges of that trauma is, however, unresolved. In outlining the theories behind the

⁶⁴ 'I am that I am' is a common English translation of the response God gave when Moses asked for his name (taken from Exodus 2:14). It effectively proclaims God as un-namable, and beyond knowing.

⁶⁵ Besemeres (2002), Gunew (1992), Grinblat (2002), Karpinski (2012), and Synan (2002) represent good examples of this work.

concept of transgenerational transmission of trauma Fromm (2012) suggests that the trauma can be implanted in the child's psyche in a symbolic sense, without any conscious recognition. At first I questioned the extent to which *my* parent's trauma was passed on to their children as a symbolic package that left a 'wound' in their psyches – as Fromm (2012:2), Laub (2012), Caruth (1996), Loewenberg (2012) and others assert about parents who have experienced severe trauma.⁶⁶ I thought that we had been spared the worst of the horrors they experienced. In the course of researching this story, and reconstructing events from my own childhood, I have had to reappraise these assumptions in the light of clinical studies, which indicate that the trauma may not be immediately recognisable as arising from the parent's trauma. The experience of other Second Generation writers also suggests that issues of inheritance are more complex than I first imagined.⁶⁷ As we know, each individual will respond differently to a given situation relative to their previous experience (Kaplan 2005). The clinical practice of psychotherapy builds its theoretical insights through individual case studies, which reveal the multifarious responses of individuals. Life narratives provide another avenue for this kind of exploration.⁶⁸ I have drawn on the insights of clinical work, and the writings of other Second Generation authors, to add another layer of complexity to my interpretations.

Trauma

Much of the literature on trauma is linked to the emergence of the concept of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which was only recognised as a condition in the 1980s, post-Vietnam war, but which referenced Freud's early work on the incidence of shell shock amongst the returned soldiers of World War I (Freud 1920). Theories of PTSD suggest that the wound is not fully experienced at the time of its occurrence and instead manifests itself belatedly, often years after the catalytic event. Since its emergence as a concept, the type of event that might trigger PTSD has been extended to include direct experiences of assault, accident, and disaster, or

⁶⁶ Much of the theoretical work in this area arises from clinical studies with disturbed patients, which may overemphasise the prevalence of transmitted trauma.

⁶⁷ The stories in Grinblat's (2002) and Burkeit's (2002) anthologies by other Second Generation writers highlighted some of the more subtle ways in which trauma can be transmitted.

⁶⁸ The concept of narrative as a healing process is discussed by a number of writers including Eakin (1999), Herman (1992), Jelinek (1986) and Henke (2000).

proximity to these, or of indirectly learning, or being informed of family involvement in such events (Luckhurst 2003:29).

The symptoms of PTSD include flashbacks, where the trauma is relived over and over again, bad dreams, frightening thoughts, and physical symptoms such as sweating and headaches. Words, objects, or situations that are reminders of the event can act as triggers that can cause avoidance symptoms, guilt, worry, depression and anxiety. PTSD can also cause the person to have trouble remembering the actual event. The psychoanalytic field is dependent on extrapolating from extensive clinical case studies to arrive at generalised theories of trauma. The result of this is that what were hitherto considered rare disorders are now believed to affect almost a quarter of the population, a condition which Hacking suggests has given rise to the 'politics of the secret, of the forgotten event' (Hacking, in Luckhurst, 2003:30). Here Hacking refers to the controversies surrounding Recovered Memory Therapy that dominated the 1990s (Luckhurst 2003), where patients were aided by their therapists in the retrieval of memory of early childhood abuse that had left unnamed traumatic wounds.⁶⁹

Luckhurst argues that as a consequence of this articulation of the symptoms of trauma a 'new kind of subjectivity emerged in the 1990's organized around the concept of trauma', which led to the conjuncture of 'the psychiatric, medical, legal, journalistic, sociological, cultural theoretical and the aesthetic' (Luckhurst 2003:28) and contributed to the organising power of trauma as a discursive practice in many disciplines. He defines this practice as 'traumaculture', which permeated Literature and the Arts in particular. Writing, for example, was seen as a form of therapy, an adjunct to, or replacement for psychotherapeutic counselling.

Henke introduced the concept of scriptotherapy: 'the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment' (2000:xii). Focusing specifically on the ameliorative power of autobiography, which she believes 'has always offered the tantalizing possibility of reinventing the self and reconstructing the subject' (xv), Henke's interdisciplinarity 'may have struck a 1985 Modern Language Association audience as more psychoanalytic than literary, and even somewhat marginal to the field of critical theory' (xiii), but has since become

⁶⁹ Controversy has surrounded this practice, and RMT has been discredited by work conducted by Loftus and Ketcham (1996), and others.

an important theme in the literary field, both in the content of its productions and in the methods of critique, commensurate with Luckhurst's concept of traumaculture.

The subjectivities inherent in any kind of psychotherapeutic analysis of the traumatised subject and/or the writing self are, however, problematical and suggest something of a paradox. Given the symptoms of PTSD, where the subject is unable to remember the details of the trauma and has only fragmented memory of the event, one would assume that they would be unable to recreate the traumatic experience as a life narrative. The very definition of trauma is that the subject is unable to process the experience as it is always recognised by the mind 'one moment too late' (Caruth 1996:91).

Douglass and Volger add to Luckhurst's analysis of traumaculture by suggesting evidence of a 'trauma industry', where almost everyone may be vulnerable to hidden traumas (2000:4) and in need of therapeutic support. Trauma, they argue, allows for the return of the real, something that actually happened, rather than the representation of the real, as 'Baudrillard was fond of reminding us' (Douglass&Volger, 2004:4). They cite Hilene Flanzbaum as pointing out that 'learning about one's heritage automatically entails the glorification of suffering, as if without proving the persistence of persecution you can legitimate your claims to minority or ethnic status' (cited in Douglaas & Volger 2003:5). Trauma, according to this argument, offers itself as an antidote to the 'triviality of daily life in late capitalism' leading to 'Trauma envy' on the part of those whose history is less dramatic, and identification with the traumatised (Douglass & Volger, 2003: 7).

Baudrillard (2002) is savage in his critique. 'It is because we have disappeared today...that we want to prove we died between 1940 and 1945 at Auschwitz or Hiroshima – that at least is a kind of history that really has some weight to it' (16). Baudrillard sees the preoccupation with traumatic histories as a product of the times, because there is 'precisely not enough truth around [and the] the effects of moral conscience or collective conscience are entirely media effects' (17). We would not know what was real even if it was staring us in the face, according to his view. Bauman's (1995) 'liquid times', that dissolve and change before we can hold on to them, are Baudrillard's simulated times, where media representations make the real disappear. Trauma in such a context emerges as an embodied real, something that can be felt, something that really happened. The writing and analysis of trauma

needs to be tempered by such insights into the motivations for acting out the trauma of previous generations or past histories. We need to strike a balance between empathy and a 'working-through' of the issues, as Dominick LaCapra cautions:

I would argue that the response of even secondary witness (including historians) to traumatic events must involve empathic unsettlement that should register in one's very mode of address in ways revealing both similarities and differences across genres (such as history and literature). But a difficulty arises when the virtual experience involved in empathy gives way to vicarious victimhood, and empathy with the victim seems to become an identity.

(LaCapra 1999:699)

La Capra suggests that while the secondary witness might empathise, the empathetic working-through needs to analyse the complexities of absence and loss, trauma and resilience, symptom or cause, guilt or denial, mourning and acceptance, without the subjective need for identification. La Capra therefore argues for an absence of binaries, with a wholehearted commitment to the resolution of the problems that allows us to 'move forward' (699). The concept of postmemory provides a framework for that process. Hirsch (2012) suggests the Second Generation cannot help but connect with their parents' legacy, and that they do so through 'imaginative investment, projections and creation' (4). The truth of the story is interpreted through the subjectivities of the Second Generation 'witness'. The formation of identity through such a process is inevitable as the stories in this manuscript testify. The imperative of the Second Generation writer to uncover the truth about their parents' silent trauma foreshadows an understanding of how that trauma impacted on the parents' life and, by default, on the lives of their offspring. Luckhurst (2003) suggests that 'the subjective and communal identification with or projection into the topography of the traumatic gap' (28) exposes these cultural productions to the accusation of mass hysteria, as Showalter (1997) controversially argued about the Recovered Memory movement. Douglass and Volger (2003) allude to 'vicarious traumatising' on the part of the therapists who actively witness the trauma of their patient. Kogan suggests it is possible that the collective memory of past traumas has 'turned us all into the second generation' (1995:145). It can be argued that the challenge for the Second Generation writer is amplified because of

their physical and emotional connection to the trauma their parents' experienced, because they have lived the aftermath of that trauma. *Maus* (Spiegelman 1996), for example, is a form of acting out or working through a trauma. His mother's suicide drives Spiegelman to understand his parent's history. I will discuss his work in more detail shortly, but first need to examine how traumatic experience may have impacted on my mother's relationship with her Russian Jewish self and, by association, how my parents' experience of war impacted on my selfhood. I am interested in the negative *and* the positive role that their experiences might have played in our family dynamic. My mother's denial of her past protected us to some extent, save for the ghostly inheritance of her *secret* trauma, which Loewenberg (2011) has shown can have a quite destructive impact on the psyche of subsequent generations.

Disassociation or resilience?

Throughout this project I have been trying to understand my mother's ambivalence to her past, particularly when Victor arrived on the scene. Her emotional responses were complex and varied and invited a range of interpretations. Was it the trauma of the war, or that moment of separation from her mother and her denial about what really happened to Elisaveta? Was it post-traumatic stress caused by her childhood abuse or the accident that nearly took her life? Was it a matter of suppressed guilt, at having abandoned her country and her brother when she decided not to return to Russia? Was it irreversible melancholia as a result of extreme loss? My mother did not actively seek to find out what happened to her mother, reasoning that it was better not to know. Was this a product of trauma, or a case of defensive denial? Is denial another form of the traumatised self or an act of resilience? Some therapists refer to this as 'disassociation' (Fromm 2011, Kaplan 2005). There are no clear answers to these questions but one can only assume that some, if not all, of these possibilities are at play and any binaries will simply mask the complexities, as Le Capra (1999) suggests. In trying to unravel these motivations I draw on the work and observations of others to reflect on my assumptions.

Lowenberg (2011) agrees that for some the *survivor syndrome* can lead to feelings of guilt and shame which can cause the survivor to form 'abnormal' families and communities, but that there is a process of 'learning and adaption' that also

occurs, which leads to ‘a restructuring of an individual life and of the world, to ensure that the trauma not only cannot be repeated, but is compensated for and repaired by fundamentally changing reality, and this can often be in a positive, socially constructed direction’ (12-17). Denial, in my mother’s case, could be seen as an act of resilience, a way to heal the trauma by creating a positive alternative to what she had experienced. Polish Catholicism offered a new way of being – a belief system that protected her (and her children) from the dangers of Russian Jewish communism. The question is how aware she was of the consequences of the life changing decisions she was making, given the limited number of *safe* choices available to her at war’s end. Despite this, or possibly as a result of this, her attitude towards her early life and her home is extremely contradictory.

More recently she has wondered if the accident she had when she was thirteen or so may have caused her to lose memory, as she had significant head injuries and took a very long time to recover. Her hearing was affected for more than a year and she had difficulty remembering events that occurred prior to her accident. She intimates that this might explain the differences in her and Victor’s memories of their home. I suspect, however, that the reason for her inability to remember key details about her life in Rostov-na-Donu, given her extraordinary detailed memory of events immediately after her departure, is more complex. There are indicators of a trauma disorder, which has caused a rupture in her memory regarding the dramatic events surrounding her mother’s, and her own, departure from home.

I have alluded elsewhere to my mother feeling that she could not face going back home. On a number of occasions she said that she felt like she would die if she went back to Rostov-na-Donu. I never interpreted this comment literally but rather metaphorically, as I did one of her favoured expressions: ‘You’ll give me a heart attack’. Trauma therapists offer some explanations for this phenomenon. Laub (2011) argues that in the wake of massive psychic trauma ‘inexplicable gaps and absences occur in what should be all too evident and readily known, and the process of exploratory curiosity comes to a halt’ (24). He describes this response as a ‘death instinct derivative’. Referring to other clinical work on trauma victims, Laub suggests that the trauma is experienced as an ‘out there’ occurrence that is not related to the experiencing subject, the ‘I’. Yet traumatic events can be vividly remembered,

unaltered by the passage of time, which makes them 'qualitatively different from ordinary memories' (25).

Of particular interest is the impact that traumatic experience has on the inner 'thou', the dialogic subject through which each individual creates meaning. According to a number of object relations theorists, trauma, like a death, disrupts the symbolic framework and threatens to damage the 'good object' (Kirschner 1994:238). Without the internal 'thou', the good object, the ability to name experience, enhance meaning and create narrative is dramatically affected. 'Conscious memory is the first casualty of the unbound death instinct derivatives' (Laub 2011:24).

My mother's lack of conscious memory of those last days in Rostov-na-Donu, when her mother was taken away in the back of the cattle truck, has become symbolic of the traumatic experience of losing her mother. Despite her protests that she had no idea of what was going on, that no one told her anything, it is obvious that she feared she may never see her mother again. She wanted to go to the camps with her, even if it meant pain and suffering. She must have known that terrible things were going on, even if she wasn't told the details, but how much, we can never know, for she cannot access that experience. I have revisited this moment with my mother many times to construct a narrative that makes sense given what we now know. She has had no capacity to undertake that analysis on her own, to draw the logical conclusions, to make the connections between one action and another. The narrative she has constructed around this event, the story she no doubt told herself many times over in that first year in Germany when she says she cried herself to sleep every night, is a story that is essentially built on denial and the idea that her mother didn't really care about her. The clearest indicator of this for me is that despite everything we now know, she is still unable to change the way she describes that moment when her mother swept her aside with the words 'She's not coming. She's not Nodel; she's Bogdanovich, from another marriage.' The Jewish man, whom my mother always described as having a horrible face, a face she could never forget, was in fact complicit in Elisaveta's effort to save her daughter. He knew that as Elisaveta's daughter, Lena was Jewish also. Furthermore, the notice issued to the residents of Rostov decreed that all Jews were to report with the whole family, whether they were Jewish or not (Ehrenberg & Grossman 1980). Even though my

mother has re-enacted the gesture her mother made when she said those words, using her right arm to sweep her daughter behind her, a gesture synonymous with the wing of a mother hen, she has found it extremely difficult to settle on this revised account and slips back into the original retelling. I have to remind her that Elisaveta and this man had conspired *together*, in that brief moment of understanding, to protect her, and that he undoubtedly would have ended up at *Zmievskaia Balka* himself.

It is this moment I believe that unleashed the death instinct derivatives that Laub analyses.⁷⁰ It is this moment that caused the split in her psyche, which has never entirely healed. Indeed, the wound of the lost mother may never be fully healed, perhaps even for subsequent generations.

The other significant trauma known to me was the abuse perpetrated by her biological father. The process of revisiting this event has had a significant impact on her troubled relationship with her own sexuality. Judith Herman's work in the area of rape and sexual abuse broadens the discourse on trauma to take account of the social as well as psychological context of abuse. Herman writes:

To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins the victim and witness in a common alliance...The systematic study of psychological trauma therefore depends on the support of a political movement.

(Herman 1994:9)

Herman's early work focused on sexual abuse in the context of patriarchal society, particularly in families where the position of women is one of subservience, and the father's role is one of absolute power (Haaken 1996). Later she adhered to the Traumatic/Dissociation model, which asserts that traumatic memory is preserved in split-off ego formations and emerges over time in a fragmentary re-experiencing of the trauma, like PTSD. Haaken argues that the trauma/dissociation model has been important in 'bridging feminist clinical and political practice and in holding onto a conception of women as both rational agents and as damaged victims' (Haaken 1996:359). The trauma my mother experienced does not fit neatly into either of these models. The silence around the abuse caused her to feel ashamed of her body,

⁷⁰ The concept of the death instinct was first developed by Sabrina Spielrein but was later incorporated into the work of Carl Jung (Covington and Wharton (2003). Ironically, Spielrein lived in Rostov-na-Donu and is buried with my grandmother at *Zmievskaia Balka*.

and to feel that she had to hide the fact of her abuse. In this respect that trauma was split-off, but it was not forgotten. While she found it difficult to talk about, when she finally felt safe to do so, she provided graphic details. She said that it had affected her whole life, which suggests an ability to remember and to heal – although not entirely.

I now have a deeper understanding of my mother's response to traumatic events and the automatic disassociation that she seems to slip into when confronted by trauma, as if she is not part of the unfolding events. I saw this when my brother died, and when we first found out Victor was alive, well and living in Moscow. These moments of disassociation could be interpreted as a numbness or inability to grieve, but I suspect they connect directly with the psychic wounds she sustained from previous traumas. She has no capacity to reconnect the splits in her psyche.

Much of the research from clinical studies tends to focus on healing symptoms of trauma, rather than identifying those elements which contribute to a person's capacity to bounce back from traumatic events and lead relatively stable lives. An overemphasis on the traumatic can sometimes overlook the success a traumatised subject has in putting it all behind them by allowing time to heal the wounds of the psyche (Joseph 2009). Recent research with Holocaust survivors in Israel suggests that those who survive trauma at a young age are often more physically resilient than the rest of their age cohort, which suggests the need to study survivorship of trauma within a lifelong perspective and consider the strategies people adopt to minimise the effects of the trauma they experienced (Shrira et al 2011).

Despite the trauma she has experienced my mother continues to demonstrate remarkable physical resilience and a positive attitude towards the people in her life and the community in general. However, she continues to avoid thinking about those things that might cause her anxiety, which does suggest the continued presence of a wound. A recent example of this was when I lent her a copy of *Everyday Stalinism, Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Fitzpatrick 2000). A few days later she rang me, sounding agitated.

'You can take that book back. I'm not going to read it. I get too upset and then I can't sleep.'

She refused to even discuss the offending section of the book. When we next spoke, she said the book made her feel guilty that her family was so privileged while

others had such a difficult time. She could not reconcile her memories of home with the hard facts of history.

‘I must have been living in a dream world,’ she chided herself.

Guilt is a strong emotion in her attitude toward her country of origin. She has a conflicted relationship with the former Soviet Union and Russian history and culture. Her inability to speak Russian without interlacing it with Polish words is in part, I suspect, a product of the shame she feels about her relatively ‘privileged’ life in Rostov-na-Donu. Her attitude towards her Russianness has, however, been largely influenced by the attitudes of others, particularly the Polish community. Her conversion to Polish Catholicism, and Polish language and culture, was also a traumatic event, albeit enacted to create a new and happier life. Her Polish conversion essentially resulted in the death of her old self.

Collective memory and trauma

Of interest in this analysis is how traumatised individuals interact with the community of others, how they are influenced by the collective memory of the community and how perspective changes to accommodate those influences. My mother was deeply troubled by the mismatch of her own experience of life in Russia with that of the other people she travelled with when she was taken to Germany in 1942. She found herself defending Rostov-na-Donu. When her new friends complained of the hunger they experienced on a daily basis, and how difficult it was to get basic items necessary for survival, my mother quickly realised that her experience of daily life was totally different to that of her compatriots.

‘I just shut up,’ she said. ‘I never said anything about how I lived.’

The first lesson my mother learned when she left home was to be quiet about who she was, how she lived and where she had come from. Not only did she need to suppress her Jewish identity but Lena also quickly learned that being a member of the Young Pioneers, a devotee of Lenin, and the daughter of a Soviet judge were equally dangerous positions among her own people. Lena’s memory of her past was quickly reshaped by the community in which she found herself.

Kerwin Klein (2000) suggests that ‘memory is not a property of individual minds, but a diverse and shifting collection of material artefacts and social practices’ (130). Social practices provide a frame for understanding how values, beliefs and

perspectives change and evolve. Working as a forced labourer in Germany alongside Poles, Russians, Ukrainians and people of other nationalities quickly reshaped her cultural selfhood. In effect, she had to become a different person to survive in Germany. According to Halbwachs (2002), 'every collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in time and space' (8). Coster reflects on his own experience with Russian intellectuals after the war:

It dawned on me that these people had been forced to shed their collective memory like a skin, and to reconstruct a largely different set of collective memories. All the historical figures of the past that had been killed, slandered and vilified under Stalin's bloody reign of terror were now shown to be good Bolsheviks and major revolutionary heroes. The whole of Soviet history had to be rewritten.

(Coster 1992:21-22)

The successive rewritings of Soviet history are testament to the shifting collection of material artefacts and social practices that have reshaped Russian identity (Ward 2006, Slater 2005, Uldricks 2009). The individual has to shift and adapt to the changing political, cultural and social forces. Individual psychologies are shaped by the collective experience and collective reconstruction of memory. Today, only the dissidents conserve the sentiment of continuity. The others must eliminate remembrance – they cannot permit themselves to keep the memory. Gyorgy Konrad writes, 'most people have an interest in losing memory' (qtd in Halbwachs 1992:22).

Had Lena returned to Russia after the war in 1946 she would have been a different Lena to the one who left in 1942. Her sense of the past had been completely shattered. She would have had to reconstruct her view of herself, and her country. Life would not have been the same. The decision to not return to Russia, to remain as a displaced person in Germany, was not just a decision she made with my father, but also one which was shaped by the collective forces around her. She was in a community of many others who had been traumatised by the events of the war. The urge to escape and start a completely new life was compelling. The next generation, it was believed, would have a better life.

Transgenerational trauma

Was the child who wrote about a concentration camp as her first major composition in Grade Four expressing the symptoms of a wounded psyche? Fromm (2011)

suggests that 'the transmission of trauma can be the transmission of a task: for example, the task of repairing a parent or avenging a humiliation' (3), which he argues can be the result of a personal family, or societal, trauma. A mere squeeze of the hand at a particular time can transmit the anxiety of the parent to the child. Fromm suggests that 'it would not be too great a step to consider the possibility of a given child's being nominated to carry and represent an anxiety on the parent's behalf' (4). Hirsch's notion of postmemory incorporates memory that is transmitted through silence and absence, the ghosts that haunt representations of the past (Hirsch 2001:2-21).

Many clinical examples tell the story of children who have been traumatised by their parent's disturbed psyches (Fromm 2011). The transmission can be crude or subtle. The child acts out the parent's trauma in an unconscious way. One could suggest that this life writing project is the product of a sense of duty to repair the parent or right a wrong from the past; that is, to heal a mother and restore a grandmother to her rightful place in the family history. Alternatively, one might suggest it is a vicarious acting out of trauma, as some critiques suggest of Second Generation writing, a desire to appropriate the identity of the traumatised parent. Much Second Generation writing could be viewed in this way, but it is not a reading I find particularly useful or illuminating because it does not reveal what is learned in the process, nor how the insights arrived at contribute to a more complex representation of cultural memory. Nevertheless, vicarious acting out of trauma is something to be wary of in life writing.

Art Spiegelman (1995) attracted significant interest and criticism for his attempt to represent his family's traumatic history in graphic form. Spiegelman was traumatised by his mother's suicide, and set out to understand the events that had made it impossible for her to go on living; he assumed that it was her experience of the Holocaust. The only way he could conduct this investigation was through his father, with whom he had a conflicted relationship. In his graphic novel, *Maus*, he adopts the comic form to represent a serious subject, and in so doing challenges hierarchical forms of storytelling. His metaphorical representation of Nazis as cats, Jews as mice, and Poles as pigs initially distances the reader, challenges conceptions of testimony in Holocaust witnessing and disrupts conventional visual forms of Holocaust representation. In the process he creates a serious genre from a 'low

brow' text by transforming the comic strip into a graphic novel. He produces different kinds of texts within the genre, with dialogue boxes, and commentary, maps of Poland and the Camps, diagrams of hideouts, family photographs, plans of the crematoria, and even a manual for shoe-repair. In creating this multi-modal visual and linguistic text Spiegelman transports the reader and himself into the heart of darkness to name his family's story, to make us witness the Holocaust.

The problem is that Spiegelman is not a first-hand witness. One reading might suggest he is the recipient of transmitted trauma caused by an event (the Holocaust) that occurred before he was born. He is also traumatised by his mother's suicide, and knows that it is a consequence of past trauma and of losing her son Richieu during the war. The son who is alive suffers because of the dead brother that he never met – a case of sibling rivalry with a ghost. As Hirsch suggests, the Second Generation's memories are overshadowed by the parents' traumatic experience so they are not able to tell their own stories (Hirsch 2012:5). The parents' stories trump anything the Second Generation child might find traumatic. This leads Elmwood (2004) to conclude that Spiegelman creates an identity for himself by recounting his parents' experience of the Holocaust: 'The central problem of identity in Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivors Tale*,' she states at the outset, 'is the author's need to write himself into a family from whose founding trauma he was absent' (691). Elmwood does not assert that he has attempted to appropriate the experience of the holocaust as his own, but does imply that he has not lived the trauma. Her assertion that Spiegelman's need to insert himself into his family history as somehow problematic seems to contradict a later comment in the same article where, in response to La Capra's concern for the Second Generation to not adopt the Holocaust as 'a founding trauma and thus a paradoxical, perhaps impossible source of meaning and identity' (La Capra qtd in Elmwood 2004:701), Elmwood (701) asks: 'How can the Holocaust *not* be such a site for the post-war child of survivors?' This is, I think, a reasonable response on her part, but does appear to contradict her earlier comment. The fact is that the parents' suffering is felt by their offspring, often in very subtle ways, as the authors in Grinblat's (2002) anthology and Burkeit's (2002) collection of Second Generation stories suggest. Hirsch (2012) similarly finds *Maus* a valuable text for understanding postmemory, and returns to it time and time again in her writing.

In my own reading of this text I do not think it a problem that Spiegelman inserts himself into the Holocaust trauma as he is, in all actuality, already there in the continuation of that trauma, in the constant reliving of the trauma by his parents. They implicate him in the trauma by juxtaposing his being alive with his brother Richieu being dead. Spiegelman lives the trauma of the Holocaust through his relationship with his parents.

The Holocaust, and the behaviour of people during the war, can certainly become a benchmark for measuring and evaluating life. I have experienced this through immersion in this project. Reading the Holocaust through the writing of Primo Levi (1978, 1979, 1986, 1989, 2007) or the witness accounts of the *Einsatzgruppen's* activities captured by Dubois (2008), viewing images of the killing fields with naked people lining up to be shot, or the many accounts by Second Generation writers such as Singer (2003), de Waal (2011), Baker (1997) and Mendelsohn (2006), provide a view of good and evil that is hard to shake off. Levi's analysis of the 'grey zone' in the camps, where Jews were co-opted as *Kapos* to carry out the routine gruesome tasks of disposing of bodies and sorting effects, provides a benchmark (which is really beyond comprehension) for evaluating character, morality and ethics. What has been widely described as the Nuremberg defense – 'I was only following orders' – provides a starting point for interrogating the character of oneself and others. Could I have done that? How might this person behave in such a situation? Would they be prepared to do the unspeakable if given the order?

Kogan's suggestion that contact with survivors makes us all the Second Generation imbricates Hirsch's analysis of the unsettling impact that visual representations of the Holocaust and witness testimony in Lanzman's film *Shoah*⁷¹ (1985) have on the viewer. The images haunt and the 'ghosts have become part of our landscape, reconfiguring the domestic as well as the public spaces of the post generation' (Hirsch 2012:8). The Holocaust also provides a benchmark for scholars in a range of disciplines, what Novick (1999) has termed the 'Holocaust industry', arguing that an interest in the Holocaust emerged long after the event and was pursued to suit political interests, rather than in memory of those who lost their

⁷¹ *Shoah* took eleven years to make, beginning in 1974. It was cut from 350 hours of raw footage down to the 9½ hours of the final version.

lives. Nevertheless, interest in the subject continues unabated.⁷² Clendinnen's extensive scholarly research for *Reading the Holocaust* (1998) surveys but a sample, albeit comprehensive in breadth, of what has been written and said about this moment in history. In particular she continually refers to Levi's analysis in *If this is a Man* (1979) to find a way of explaining the event.

The daughter's desire to understand and represent her mother's and grandmother's life experience invokes a perspective that is not only framed by the concept of the self as a traumatised being, but also an exploration of the self as female. A feminist analysis of each of the stories in this collection is beyond the scope of this work but would provide salient insights into the complexities of issues that women such as my mother faced during *and* after the Second World War – an account of the momentous life and death decisions they made as a matter of course.

Gender and agency

'You want too much out of life,' my mother remarked, after listening to the reasons why I could not continue in my first marriage, back in 1995. The statement struck me as profound at the time because it summed up so much about her, and her pragmatic approach to life. The tone was not judgmental, but more a curious fusion of surprise, admiration and disbelief, as if she had never dared to expect that life could ever meet one's hopes. Most significantly I interpreted it as a reflection of her understanding and acceptance of what women in patriarchal society must accept as their lot in life. Her values were very different to my own.

She had implicitly accepted the dominant discourse of her social group; marriage involved subjugation, and suppression of one's own dreams and desires. Servitude, and compliance with the expected role for housewife, mother and wife, was the 'reality' that she accepted when she married my father. How did she arrive at this position? What forces shaped this view of her world? Displacement from her country of birth and upbringing had opened up a whole new set of values and beliefs for her. My mother could have chosen to go back to Russia at the end of the war, but instead decided to marry a man from another language, religion and culture,

⁷² Google good reads lists 379 'well written' books on the Holocaust and numerous reputable websites. There are countless scholarly journals, websites and courses that focus on the Holocaust.

and go to the ends of the earth with him. I have always been curious about the circumstances under which these momentous decisions were made.

Her mother had taken advantage of the emancipation of women in Soviet Russia post-revolution (Halle 1934, Lapidus 1978), and was part of the drive to create a new and prosperous nation. My mother turned her back on all that and made her decision on the basis of different criteria. She was alert to dangers and wired for survival. The imperative, as it was for many survivors, was to restore normality, forget the trauma, start a new life, and create stability and security.

My mother may well have wished to resume her studies and pursue her intended career as a pharmacist. While women were active in building the new Soviet economy, and made up an increasing proportion of the labour force from the 1920s onwards (Lapidus 1978:166), their role in the home was not necessarily emancipated. The socialist experiment in Russia had failed to disrupt the cultural norms that were historically deeply patriarchal (4), a tradition that Lenin believed must be eradicated (Fitzpatrick 1999:103). Fitzpatrick cites educated or professional women seeing housework as beneath them, and hiring less educated servants to do the work. Elisaveta, for example, employed a young girl from a nearby village to do her housework. The increasing number of privileges afforded Party members was regarded as a by-product of the transition to 'universal enrichment' (Fitzpatrick 1999:105), yet it was evident that this stratification was not appreciated by those outside the inner circle. There were no guarantees that my mother would enjoy the same benefits upon her return.

The contradictions within the Soviet system were no doubt part of the counter indoctrination that she was exposed to while in Germany, particularly from fellow Soviets. The relations and norms of those who made up her community had a profound influence on the decisions she made. Many compelling reasons interacted to shape her decision to turn her back on Europe and her old life. Both my parents *wanted* to go 'home', but home was an unknown quantity for them as a couple. Her decision was a forced choice in some ways, but it also demonstrates evidence of agency. My mother made active choices, albeit influenced by the views of others and the circumstances in which she found herself.

As a migrant woman in Australia my mother had to adapt to a completely new set of social norms. As Besemeres (2002) suggests, she had to translate herself into the

language and cultural values of her new society. These translations have been enacted through the particularities of the Anglo-Australian patriarchal norms of the 1950s in what Karpinski (2012:2) refers to as 'borrowed tongues', a language which is not one's own, but is borrowed and 'on loan'. She extends this metaphor to include the notion of a debt owed to the dominant culture, and as also referring to women's borrowing of dominant patriarchal discourse. Zaborowska (1995) and Gunew (1993) also address the specificity of the gendered identity struggles that migrant women had to undertake in their process of enculturation in a new country. Australia in the 1950s was also deeply patriarchal, and post-war values lent heavily towards the woman-as-homemaker.

If autobiography has been used by many women to write themselves into history, as Smith and Watson assert (1998:5), they have had to do so by writing against the patriarchal grain, by challenging and critiquing the dominant discourse, by positioning themselves discursively in opposition. For migrant women this is a double-sided exercise of simultaneously trying to gain acceptance in the borrowed tongue as well. For my mother, the process of assimilation/translation into the culture was complicated by her multiple allegiances. She had always imagined herself working, like all upwardly mobile Russian women did in Soviet Russia, yet she was confronted by a different paradigm in the migrant community of the Latrobe Valley. She struggled with this, but did not want to isolate herself from the community and particularly her female peers. My father was a traditional man who believed he should be the sole breadwinner of the family. He had more modest ambitions, while my mother always saw herself as providing opportunities – particularly for her daughter. She finally managed to achieve a degree of independence and did go out to work once we children were older. She did not, however, ever pursue her dream of a university education, for that would have been impossible in her given circumstances.

Transference

My mother has lived in Australia for more than sixty years, the greater part of her life. She is still trying to translate herself into the shifting and changing discourses of Australian society, and has become much more open-minded in her values and beliefs. She is an engaged citizen and follows public debates. Her formative years, as

the daughter of an upwardly mobile Soviet apparatchik, have influenced her approach to the adopted (no longer 'borrowed') language and culture of Australia. Her children and grandchildren have provided alternative perspectives, and she has adapted and changed to sustain her relationship with them. She has undergone enormous shifts over the years in response to her life experiences, including involvement in this project, as the following interaction illustrates.

I was reading my mother an email from Victor out loud in Russian. She delights in correcting my pronunciation, affirming her status as a native speaker. Victor's youngest son Kirril has just completed his military service and studies, and is looking for work as a television journalist or documentary maker in the Urals.

'Oh, he's following in his father's footsteps,' she exclaims, clapping her hands in delight.

'Yes. All three of his sons have taken similar paths to their father and worked in television and the Arts.'

'I'm glad you didn't follow in my footsteps,' she chuckles, and pats my hand.

I didn't ask her to elaborate. I knew what she meant.

25. Kaddish

Cracow, Poland, July 2012

We had decided to rent an apartment in Kazimierz, the Jewish quarter on the outskirts of the historic area of Cracow, for the tail end of our European summer holiday. To our delight we discover that we have serendipitously arrived on the eve of the 22nd Jewish Festival, which lasts for eight days and brings together artists of Jewish culture from all over the world. I had read about the revival of Jewish culture in Poland and the Poles desire to right the wrongs of the past, yet am still a little bemused that a country that was once home to more than 3 million Jewish people, and which had historically been eager to be rid of them, should play host to a revival of Jewish culture. The director of the festival, Janusz Makuch, is the son of a Catholic family, and part of a generation that is now taking an interest in what was lost in a cultural sense – driven, it seems, by a love of Klezmer music.

A member of my husband's extended family, also named Janusz, was one of seven survivors of the pogrom at Jedwabne, where the Polish people of the village reportedly locked more than 340 Jewish people in a barn and set it alight. His heroic escape from the inferno is part of their family folklore. When I read Jan Gross's book *Neighbours* (2001), which details this atrocity, I was ashamed of my Polish ancestry, and better understood why my mother had been too frightened to reveal her Jewish background in her adopted Polish community. Anti-Semitism is a delicate subject in Poland, and not one we would dare to raise. Our delight at the forthcoming festivities is therefore tempered by the realisation that there are relatively few Jews living in Poland, and that the revival of their culture is happening in a city whose economy is bolstered by the passing trade of Auschwitz pilgrims. Converted golf buggies emblazoned with brightly coloured invitations to visit Schindler's factory and the most famous death camp in Poland trawl the Jewish quarter in search of custom.

Every concert we have attended at the Tempel Synagogue over the past couple of days has been filled to the brim; tonight is no exception, despite the heat and humidity. We have retreated upstairs, to catch the hint of a breeze entering through the open doors of the balcony area, while we listen to the Uri Caine Ensemble. Midway through the concert, seeking fresh air on the balcony, I meet Ellie Shapiro, the Director of the Jewish Music Festival at Berkeley, who is engaged in a study of

the revival of Jewish music in Cracow. We talk animatedly about our respective areas of study. She is insistent that I meet a Jewish academic from Warsaw who has supported many young Poles who have discovered later in life that their parents are Jewish and have kept their identity secret. Cracow is confusing me. The fusion of Polish, Russian, Jewish, Catholic and Australian identity that I have adopted leaves me somewhat tongue-tied in this conversation. I have always associated my 'Polishness' with Catholicism, but now I am being spoken to as if I am a Polish Jew.

She interrupts the conversation mid-sentence.

'Wait. I can hear Cantor Ben Zion Miller is about to sing the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. You can't miss this, he's amazing.'

He has already begun with a slow, low incantation, which is building in volume. The cantor's voice is filling the auditorium with the full-bodied tone of a tenor at his peak. People have even stopped fanning themselves with their programs, transfixed by his hypnotic chant. Kaddish is the prayer that Father Dubois wanted read at the graves of all those whom he described as the victims of the 'Shoah by bullets', people like my grandmother who were buried in ravines and hollowed out pits with thousands of others, for whom no prayers were said. The cantor's voice seems to capture the lament of all who have grieved for their lost loved ones, while at the same time generating an aura of lightness in his voice that elevates the spirits of the audience. His voice continues to soar ever higher, circling the domed ceiling of the Synagogue, as if trying to raise the roof. I can't believe that such a voice can come from one body. It is as if we are all filled with his harmonic resonance, united by the force of his incantation. When he finally bows his head and the music stops, there is a collective gasp of silence, followed by uproarious applause and cheers. This cantor has fulfilled his role as a galvanising force for communal expression and become the voice of the congregation.

The emotion I wanted to feel for my grandmother while at *Zmievskaya Balka* now reveals itself in euphoric tears. I have come to a place where I have experienced her loss in the voice of the cantor – a musical space where her memory can be eulogised and put to rest, along with all the other souls that perished as a result of their ethnicity. Here, in my father's country, in the city where his mother was born – surrounded by Holocaust scholars from around the world, Poles celebrating a lost element of their culture, the next generation trying to understand it, with the man

who has helped me understand what it means to be a secular Jew standing beside me with tears in his eyes – I have shared in a collective memorial for those who have died. I finally understand that all I can do for my mother's mother, my grandmother, is to remember her.

I now know so much more about her, but realise that I can never really know her, never fully understand what she went through, how she lived, what her dreams were, what was lost, or what she felt in those last weeks, days and hours of her life. I have enough information now, however, to pay tribute to a woman who deserves to be remembered by her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, irrespective of any reservations they might hold about her activities as a judge in Stalin's courts.

I write this Eulogy in memoriam of the grandmother I never knew.

Eulogy for my grandmother, Elisaveta Solomova Nodel

The Holocaust claimed many victims. My grandmother Elisaveta was one of them, a victim of *Einsatzgruppen D*, the Nazi killing squad, which accompanied the occupying forces of the Wehrmacht. On August 11th 1942, Elisaveta Solomova Nodel went to meet her inevitable fate in the hope that her children and husband would survive. In making this last journey alone, with one small suitcase, she defied the decree of a dangerous and ruthless occupying force that had ordered her to come to the registration point with her family and the keys to their apartment. Such courage must be remembered by all of her descendants. It represents a defining moment of character.

Elisaveta came from a family of five children. Her father Solomon died well before the war, but we have no date. Her mother, Galina, and two sisters, Bella and Alexandra, were also killed, and are buried at *Zmievskaya Balka* with Elisaveta. We don't know if they saw each other there. Elisaveta's brother Ethiel died at the front, fighting for his country, while Abram, the younger brother, also a soldier, died in 1946 from injuries he incurred during the war. A whole family was almost wiped out, save for the surviving children of the three Nodel sisters – Sophia and Vladimir, daughter and son of Alexandra; Valentin, son of Bella; and Victor and Lena, Elisaveta's children – of whom only Victor and Lena are still alive today.

It is difficult, from the distance of 2013, to fathom the devastation of that period or to fully comprehend the terror that my ancestors experienced, but the manner in

which Elisaveta died will always haunt her descendants. She died a brutal, humiliating, terrifying and, undoubtedly, excruciatingly painful death, surrounded by thousands of others. We should dwell not just on her tragic final hours, however, but also acknowledge the other achievements of her life. She lived through the extraordinary times of Soviet Russia, from the revolution of 1917 until August 1942, and raised a family whom she sought to protect. We can honour her strength and determination.

We don't know exactly where Elisaveta was born as there is no record remaining of her birth. Her two sisters are registered in the records of the Mariupol synagogue yet there is no record of Elisaveta. My mother is sure she was born in 1905. The Nodel family also lived in Taganrog, another Jewish settlement close to Mariupol, which is about 150 kms from Rostov-na-Donu. Many records were destroyed in the devastation of the war so it has been difficult to piece together the factual details.

Elisaveta never completed high school, but went to work in a factory to help support her family. The rapid industrialisation of Russia after the Revolution meant that many women entered the workforce and took their place on the production line. She had her first child, Lena, in 1925, but we are not sure if it was in Mariupol or in Rostov-na-Donu, for there is no official record of Lena's birth either, even though she always had legitimate identity papers. I have wondered if these documents were deliberately removed to protect Lena from carrying the ethnic Jewish label, but there is no way of knowing.

I have sought the answer to many questions:

Who was Elisaveta? What sort of person was she? What motivated her to join the Communist Party? Was she a 'devout' or pragmatic communist? Was she an ethical or corrupt practitioner of the law? Did she love her daughter, or did she see her as a symbol of her previous unhappy marriage? What was her relationship with her own mother and siblings? I have only been able to speculate answers to these questions, based on the limited available evidence.

Her daughter and son remember her as a beautiful, well-dressed woman who appreciated fine things. Elisaveta loved the arts, and frequently attended Rostov-na-Donu theatres, ballets and operas. As a worker in theatre administration her husband ensured that the whole family was able to enjoy the cultural highlights of the city. The local circus was another favourite family event. Lena remembers her

parents being very socially active, with a wide circle of friends and acquaintances. As a judge and Chairman of the Union of Judges for the Rostov Region, Elisaveta was a public figure who commanded respect but who was also quite probably feared, and even disliked, by some.

She enjoyed the privileges of her position and the benefits afforded to Party members and bureaucrats. Lena remembers visiting the canteen, meant for Party members only, where they were able to procure beautifully cooked meals, which they took home to share with the family. While enjoying the benefits of her position Elisaveta also continued to support her mother and extended family financially, despite their antagonism towards her second husband. And we know from the moving letter she wrote to her brother at the front that she maintained contact with her family. Her son was welcomed back into this family at the end of the war and recognised as a legitimate member.

We get some insight into her character from the way she lived her life and the decisions she made. Elisaveta appears to have been a hard taskmaster who insisted her daughter perform chores for the family – shopping for food, running errands and caring for her brother. A young woman from a nearby village was employed to clean the house and do the family's laundry. Elisaveta was very particular about how things were to be done and always checked that the cleaning was done properly. Mother and daughter attended the public baths weekly, and Lena remembers Elisaveta always scrubbing the bath and shower cubicle before either of them could bathe.

A recurring theme in her daughter's memory of her mother was that Elisaveta was always very well dressed, and extremely particular about the quality of the fabrics she wore. A solidly built woman with a large bosom, she was fussy about the cut of her clothes and the fineness of the finish. She regularly attended sanatoriums and health farms to maintain her figure (another benefit of Party membership). She also ensured that her children were well groomed and well dressed, as the photographs we still have testify.

Elisaveta was no doubt a complex person with many different sides to her character. Like many Russian citizens who tried to fashion a life for themselves in the Soviet regime she would have been faced with numerous moral and ethical dilemmas. Some of the decisions she made had clear implications for her children.

Had she evacuated when ordered, for example, the family may have survived the war but, as Victor pointed out, I would not be here to tell that story. 'It was how it was,' he once wrote. It is not for us to make judgments with the benefit of historical hindsight.

In opening the door to the untold stories of my mother's life, and rummaging around in the past, I have found an uncle, a living extended family, and have learned a great deal more about my ancestral heritage. Elisaveta, the woman whose name I carry at the core of my identity, is the lost grandmother whom I will always remember. I can only hope that my work has succeeded in laying her ghost to rest.

Let this be an end to unspeakable sorrow, fear and guilt; let her spirit and courage live on through those who contain her.

26. Encore

Melbourne, May 2013

‘I finished the book and I’m about to start reading it again,’ my mother says. ‘My memory is not what it used to be.’

‘Which book?’ I ask. As the provider of most of her reading material I am unsure which book she would enjoy so much that she would want to read it again immediately.

‘Your book,’ she says, with a distinctly *Yiddisher* mother accent.

She laughs at my surprise. I had never thought of it as a book – this thesis that has involved a long, torturous wrestling with the truth and the ethics of representation in life writing. I hold my breath, waiting for what she will say next. I wonder what it is like to have your daughter tell your life story and analyse it like a critic. I’m not sure I would want my children to undertake such a project with my life.

‘And... what did you think?’

There is a brief moment of silence as she breathes in deeply.

‘It’s wonderful,’ she gushes. ‘At first I was angry that you put all my secrets into it, but I kept reading and now I think it’s wonderful. The first night I cried about Henry, and losing the people that I love, but then I thought it was wonderful that you wrote all that down. I cried *and* I laughed. I love it.’

I ask her if she picked up any inaccuracies, if she has marked any sections as I have asked her to do, or if there are things she wants me to change.

‘No, everything was just as it happened. Except it was Bolek, not that other name that you used. That annoyed me. You should say it was Bolek. He won’t ever read it. And you didn’t say that I worked at the Co-op for ten years. I was very proud of that.’

Despite the note of resentment about this omission she chatters on about how she couldn’t stop reading and rereading certain parts, while some stories were too difficult emotionally to read again. She thinks I have spent too much time talking about what other people have said, and doesn’t understand why I have done so. She appears uninterested in my struggle with verisimilitude and the truth. It is all true, as far as she is concerned. It is her life, our life, ‘just as it happened’.

I am thrilled that my mother is so delighted with the representation I have crafted. She is not challenging my interpretation. She is not saying 'A lot of what you wrote is not true. It didn't happen like that.' She is saying 'Yes, this is how it happened. You wrote it all down, just as I told you.' She likes the fiction I have created from her accounts. It is her life. As far as she is concerned, I have captured her life. It is I who has challenged my interpretation of the story. It is I who has struggled with the ethics of writing it. Rather than appeasing my concerns about the truth, her response confirms much of the theoretical thinking about life narratives – 'there is no such thing as pure autobiography', as Kate Douglas (2010:12) surmises. In writing about the past the writer constructs what happened, rather than reflects it like a mirror. The tropes employed in the construction of the narrative to achieve verisimilitude create their own truth, which in turn modifies memory. As Antze and Lambek (1996) observed: 'Memories are produced out of experience and in turn shape it' (xi) through the act of gazing. I realise that my mother's reading of the narrative has been shaped by our collective reconstructions, by the questions I have asked, by the findings from my research, and by my challenging her accounts when I have pointed out inconsistencies. My mother's faith and involvement in my process has resulted in the construction of a collective memory, enacted in our particular cultural space, looking back to a world that no longer exists. We have looked back together over many years, but it is my reconstructed representations that have reshaped her memory.

I did not set out to transform my mother's memory of her past, but it appears to be what has happened. The process of constructing these narratives has helped her talk about things she has never considered before, and confront her unexamined life. She had to face the truth about what happened to her mother and family, but in the process she reconnected with her brother after 67 years. This aspect alone transformed her image of the past. *He* had not forgotten her or their life together. *He* had not tried to erase the trauma, but rather kept it alive through the poetry of hope. The 'book' has provided a narrative that she feels captures her life experience. 'I've been through a lot, haven't I?' she remarked, as if surprised that her own life has made such interesting reading. She has read her own story, empathised with the representation of her character, reflected upon her life, as if it belonged to someone else, and deemed it to be worthy of a more public reading.

As author and subject of this thesis I have also undergone transformations in the many selves that I am. Perhaps, most significantly, I have formed a deep, emotionally and intellectually rewarding relationship with the uncle I met only a few years ago. Together we have tried to piece together the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of Elisaveta Bogdanovich, and her husband Pavel. Victor has provided the missing Russian link, which in some way compensates for, and continues to ameliorate, the absence of Elisaveta in my life. The connection with my Russian Jewish heritage is an aspect of myself that will continue to grow, and evolve, as I persist with learning the Russian language and participate in Jewish cultural life. These new identities, however, must be the subject of another lived narrative.

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