

The Never-Told Story

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Guilt

Six years ago I pushed guilt to the farthest corner of my mind to be dealt with later. But it stayed there, sitting in the dark and clenching its teeth. My efforts to ignore it were worthless. How could I escape such a misery? I looked to my family for relief. Maybe my time spent with my three little boys might dissipate the feeling of guilt. Could I hide it behind those little shoulders? My home-school-work-home schedule kept me home not quite enough. Often I was mentally absent from my family even when I was with them physically. Present and absent at the same time. They grew so fast. I felt I was robbing them of their childhood. It was a shame that I could not be present for my own kids.

Often I just want to throw away unbearable stones of guilt and shame from my baggage with hope of finding happiness without the heavy weighted bag. Yet, would I be the same person?

Possibly I should look inward to find there a deeper understanding of my own self, of the reality I choose to see. Perhaps, my search for the escape would not bring me into the corner where the blind fear has been always waiting with open arms.

The voice of my little son John screamed in my ear and brought me back.

“Mom! Mom! Can you hear me? Is dinner ready? H-U-N-G-R-Y!” His physical reality reawakened the one fear from my childhood that my guilt had not overrun—the fear of hunger.

Despite attempting to look at my situation from different angles, the possibility of hunger had always thrown me to the actuality of the present.

The Collapse of the System

After I graduated from high school, I promised myself that I would do whatever it took to make sure my family would not go hungry. This promise was born of my teenage experience in

Ukraine. I understood why my mom hid her tears when I ran home from school and asked for dinner.

“It was the last potato. There is nothing to cook even a soup from.”

At the age of fifteen I understood the misery of my parents—an inability to impact change to a situation that is unpleasant, uncomfortable, even potentially life threatening for your child. Overflowing the sadness of my reality, the heartbreaking sight of my mom crying was guiding me to accept the tragedies of their lives. It was a shame. What else could my mom do? That shame sharply cut my childhood from my present, leaving an unfamiliar weight of unknown feelings over my shoulders. I felt at fault for my own helplessness. I could change nothing. Holding hands together, guilt and shame opened the doors into my adult life and became the essential parts of my morality that I am still holding onto.

I never asked for anything to eat and pretended that I had no appetite. The hunger headaches continued to provide a reminder of where I came from. At some point I did not feel the hunger, but the headaches reminded me that I had not eaten for an entire day. Hunger kept me from sleeping and from my dreams, the only place I found escape and could disconnect from reality.

Once a month my parents received vouchers that could be exchanged for the bare necessities: bread, sugar, and milk. A person could exchange a voucher for a limited daily portion of food. Each day after school I stood in seemingly never-ending queues at empty-shelved grocery stores. There I was meeting my parents who were staying in two other lines to exchange their vouchers. If one were standing in the line for bread he or she might not have enough time to stand in another one for cheese or milk. It was not enough for a family to eat one or half of a meal a day, but this was the reality in which I grew up.

The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Fifteen Soviet republics broke apart and formed independent nations. It was the time of hopes and disillusion. The collapse of the old communist regime was associated with a hyperinflation that threw the majority of its people into poverty. The new countries inherited the inefficient communist economy of which the government owned and managed absolutely everything, from a little bakery to a huge factory. The whole population of Ukraine worked for the government. The newly formed government soon defaulted on its obligations and failed to pay salaries to its employees, including my

parents. Why did my parents go to work every day even when they knew they would not be paid? They were teaching at the local university. Mom was teaching Mechanical Engineering and Dad was a professor of Discrete Mathematics. I am not sure whether it was a sense of duty or a means of escape from their misery that led my parents to continue to go to work. My parents' life was similar to a train that had stopped, but whose passengers were still moving forward by inertia. They were gatekeepers preserving order from chaos. Their obedience to whatever the reality presented always puzzled me.

The Burden of My Heritage

Someone said that history evolves in circles, or spirals; this seems right to me. Or, perhaps my childhood memories are just a faded reflection of my parents' past. Either way, that history has been deeply rooted not only in culture and customs but also in the physical place. I was a child of two parents who belonged to two dehumanized nationalities—one controlled by Adolf Hitler, and the other by Joseph Stalin. Two tragic pasts that intersected at the same place to become my family. The chilling truth of their pasts was always invisibly present. It had never left them alone. It often was deleted from an obvious phrase, slipped into a deep sigh, or glimpsed in their eyes. However, they always diligently pushed it into the farthest corner of their memories to protect my reality from the horrors of their past. My parents believed that if I did not know it, then it would not repeat. Perhaps this chilling feeling of guilt would never be able to paralyze my soul if I had never heard about my parents' past. Often the paralyzing power of their fears had thrown the room into a chilling silence which nothing had enough force to break. They were ashamed not of their past but of their helplessness, their inability to change it. They were impotent survivors.

Only once my mom asked me: "Do you remember our neighbor Martha, who grandpa was taking care of until she passed away?" She continued as if she were discussing the weather. Apparently, Martha was hiding my grandmother and her three-year-old child in a dirt hole under rotten vegetables for three years of German occupation during WWII while my grandfather joined the Soviet Army. After the war my grandfather went to Siberia to bring Martha back. She had been sentenced for letting Germans live in her house while she was living in the shed where she kept my grandmother. I was not able to ask my mother more, as she

seemed to be swallowed by her memories. For all of her life, my mom was scared to death to mention that she was Jewish. Maybe that's why she was constantly straightening my curly hair.

My father's family survived the Holodomor, the great famine of 1932–33. In fact, only two kids in my grandfather's family of nine, my grandfather and my aunt, survived the man-made famine, or what the Soviets then and Russia now call "the agricultural misfortune." This genocide of four million Ukrainians occurred in what was known as the "Breadbasket of Europe." Was it a dark irony of evil?

The Cost of Obedience

My dad survived WWII, the German occupation, and yet another famine, the post-war starvation of 1946 induced by Stalin that only a few heard about. The entire harvest as well as any kind of food that was found in farmers' houses—everything was expropriated to support Soviet bloc countries after the war, leaving homes empty for the cold winter. The Bolsheviks confiscated everything: rights, customs, language, history, and even religion. For these they substituted obedience to ideology based on fear. The villages were surrounded by Russian commissars to keep farmers from scavenging for food in the fields. The reality was that those Ukrainians were considered enemies of the Soviet State because they could sell their harvest in the city and make a profit. The imaginary possibility of profit was their only sin, but it was a sin that could demolish Soviet ideology.

My dad recalled that they had no passports, no citizenship, and no rights. My dad ended up in an orphanage in the summer of 1946, but this probably saved his life: "We all waited for morning. Usually Russian commissars used to feed their horses not far from our orphanage. We would all run down when we saw them. They liked to throw some crumbs of food into the horse's water buckets or just on the ground and watch us crawling and fighting for them. It was hard to recognize human beings in those starving children. Always silent, we had no strength to cry. Our faces reminded one of nothing more than rotten apples," my dad recalled.

Once my dad concluded: "Even a slave's life was of some value. It was cruel, but they still valued slaves as property but the Soviet peasants' lives were valued at nothing. People ate everything and as a result, there were no animals, no dogs, no cats, and no rats."

“Orphans also were sent to the fields to collect the grains that could be left on the ground after the harvest was collected and confiscated. Our new school teacher, Maria, who was sixteen years old, fainted a couple of times one day. At one point she was not able to stand anymore. Her trembling hands gathered a few grains but she was not able to chew. Her dried soft coughing attracted attention of two other commissars.”

“Hey Ivan, it seems she stole grains from the proletariat. She is choking’—one commissar pointed at kneeling Maria and swiftly jumped from his horse. “

“Maria’s little body was shrugging in the dirt from sounds of each hit of black boots. Rage was coming stronger with each hit. However, Maria never made a sound. Her lips curved in a strange smile covered in blood and dirt.”

“I remember that her smile puzzled me.” My dad continued: “Maybe she saw an angel and thus she did not feel the pain. Maybe God exists. The fear paralyzed me. I did not know what I was scared of the most—those commissars or my thoughts? I wished I could scream. They threw her body on the horse and left. Nobody heard about Maria ever again.”

It seems my dad was still wandering in his past while silence filled the room.

My dad often recollected “ghost-owned villages,” where the previous owners, who had starved to death, were often still present in their homes as evidenced by the smell. In September of 1947 only one third of his class returned for the new school year.

The Soviet regime built an artificial reality where those women, children, and elderly had either to be remembered by history as outlaws or be wiped from its pages. Ukrainians who lived on the land (and Ukraine was mostly an agrarian country at that time) simply did not fit the Soviet reality of the country of the proletariat, thus Soviet historians erased Ukrainians’ existence to conceal the truth. They substituted it with a myth about the Greatness of Russia, the savior nation that protected all of the other 14 nations (republics) from the evils of immoral, ignorant, money-worshiping capitalism.

It seems that the first step of any dehumanization starts from creating those beyond the law, places where the cost of life comes down to nothing. But does life have a price tag?

It is beyond comprehension why only a few resisted. Maybe any form of peace was the better choice than civil war and a second world war. Why did so many stay silent in their cold ignorance?

The world was focused on Nazi Germany, then the war, then rebuilding after the war. Ukraine was exhausted by famine, repressions, and the war. Besides, who could actually stand and resist—women and children? All the men either perished in the war or were in the Soviet Army still fighting with the allies in the Far East.

People, but Only Masks

Despite the difficulties of our past, in 1991 we all had hopes for change, for freedom, to be free from the totalitarian communist regime. Each citizen of Ukraine received a privatization voucher for state-owned assets, which could be exchanged for common stock in industrial and energy-sector enterprises owned by the state. The privatization was supposed to help with the transition from the planned socialistic economy to a free market economy. However, Ukraine's future was chained to its past. The time spent under the Soviet system had naturally generated a special breed of people. Most of those who succeeded during the communist regime lacked any moral principles, and were driven instead by a monumental thirst for power. People who had no fear and felt no pain. It seems that ideology was just a wet nurse who had never noticed that her grown up children developed no attachment to the ideology itself. How could they be attached to her if they had no moral values? Those specially selected from generation to generation to be leaders of the communist party just switched their masks after Ukraine became an independent country, keeping the reins of power in their hands, while those who merely survived the regime knew no better than to submit to that power.

Thus most of the people willingly sold their hope for freedom to whatever power presented itself to them. Instead of investing their vouchers in the shares of government-owned enterprises, the citizens exchanged their privatization vouchers for a few kilograms of potatoes, or sugar, or a couple of bottles of vodka. Consequently, the formal act of privatization sealed the power in the hands of a small group of oligarchs.

Can the History Circle be Broken?

The political situation in Ukraine spurred me to search for a country where I could raise my children to exercise freedom of speech without fear. A few years after graduating from college I moved to the United States, where I found freedom. But everything comes with a cost. I left a part of my heart with my

mom and dad in Ukraine. In spite of the difficulty of their lives, they would not relocate. I live with the pain of having left them behind.

To deal with my guilt, to find a short-term escape from its constant presence, I filled my life with work. I was a contractor for a large international corporation. Each assignment required working in different parts of the United States for a set period of time, without weekends or any time off. In other words, my job required constant travel. I accepted all assignments and without breaks between them. I adopted a second dog and fired the gardener so I could plant fifteen rose bushes and four trees with my own hands. I bought a 101-year-old foreclosed home to renovate. I believed that moving out of my old place would help me to escape from my memories. Even though these efforts made it easier to ignore reminders of the past, the last phone conversation with my dad still remained hidden in my head; it called aloud to awaken my guilt, bringing some rain to the sunny days.

The Never-Told Story

John sat on the top branch of the old oak. His brother hid in the blooming pink azalea next to the tree. John's eyes met mine. He pressed his puffy finger against his childish lips. "Shhh," he whispered.

My dad turned toward John's brother Peter, but John jumped down right in front of us. "Boo!" he shouted through the giggles and took off. Pretending that we couldn't find his brother, we continued further into the garden.

"It has been a nice solution to keep them quiet after you tortured them with math for two hours in a row," I said. "I wish I could go back into those seemingly endless hours of studying and listening when you simply freed my imagination. Only now I have realized that if you had allowed my imagination to become stuck in a frame of reason, I would have simply painted everything into grey color. You are the best father." In response, he squeezed my hand a little and a strange smile touched the corners of his lips. My father called up his past. He was back in 1944 in Ukraine. I readied myself to hear his story that I knew so well.

"Well, it was on my sixth birthday. I fell to the tall grass when I heard shooting. The kid passed me, running swiftly like lightning. In a second he was on the top of the old oak. He put his shaking muddy little finger against his childish lips, at the same moment his desperate eyes, filled with fear, met mine. Two

enormous German shepherd dogs were near enough to pounce on me, but the kid jumped, and ran to distract the dogs from me.” The dogs caught him. The younger Nazi bragged to his older companion, “We dodged a bullet on this one. Did he think that he could run away? Nobody can escape from us.”

“Why did he jump?” I asked.

Dad ignored my question and continued, saying that the older Nazi looked around, and for a moment his eyes stopped on my father.

“He was just a stupid kid. The older guy continued talking in a lower voice as he retrieved the dogs. His eyes were still fixed on me when he pulled the dogs to his left knee. He continued talking. Cold fear paralyzed my brain. I watched his moving lips, but heard nothing.”

My dad was whispering now. “My German was still not good enough after three years of the occupation, but I did understand what they said. That day we buried seventy-two kids from ages eight to fourteen. Having left from Western Ukraine, they arrived at our train station in Eastern Ukraine instead of going to a labor camp in Germany as was intended. Supposedly, the wagon was attached to the wrong train. Based on German efficiency, the decision was made that bullets were cheaper than food.”

My dad sighed and continued to point at the tree. He put his finger to his slightly trembling lips, “I see the boy there on the branch....”

Giggling noises from behind brought both of us back to reality. Minutes later my dad was playing basketball with the boys. Only four hours had passed since I picked him up from the airport, but I had the feeling that he had always been here during the last two years that we had not seen each other.

Roach

Six hours later I was running through the emptiness of a never-ending grey hallway. I felt nauseated from the strong odor of medicine combined with chlorine. There was not enough air. All sounds faded. Heartbeats pounded in my head.

I found myself in a light blue painted square room with a low ceiling that felt almost like it was pressing on my head. My father’s bed was in the middle, raised to a height that made the ceiling appear even lower. I opened my eyes and noticed a dark spot moving on the counter, next to the sink. It was a light brown fully-grown cockroach. I pressed the red alarm button. Ten minutes passed but nobody came. It

seemed that time had a quality of dissolving here. In the stroke unit patients cannot complain. The roach happily found a large drop of water. It crawled backward around it, stopped for few seconds and repeated it again in some kind of a ritual. I wondered if it was the only living creature on the whole floor enjoying life.

I approached the nursing station. Sounds of alarms coming from opposite rooms sounded synchronized in a surrealistic harmony. The nursing staff ate their lunches, apparently separated by an invisible wall, or perhaps they were located on an isolated island where noises, screams, and pleas for help could not be heard. In my reality, an enormous invisible wall appeared between my yesterday and tomorrow.

“Excuse me!” I heard my voice repeat again.

A voice tinged with irritation responded, “Lunch will be over in ten minutes, wait in your room, please. We will help you shortly.”

“Sorry to bother you, there’s a cockroach crawling on the counter in my father’s room,” I said hopelessly.

“Claire, it’s your turn, sweetheart, go help her,” the voice replied.

Claire was young, about twenty-four years old. Blonde hair tied in a ponytail. Blue eyes set in an expressionless face. I couldn’t describe Claire as pretty, but her smile added lines of kindness to her face.

“Where is your roach? What is the room number?” she asked.

I followed her at a fast pace.

“Four-two-six,” I answered.

My dad had not moved since I left him. To be exact, he had not moved since the moment he arrived at the ICU. The roach wandered around the sink.

“Next time just squish it,” Claire suggested. She turned to the sink, washed her hands with bubbled hand sanitizer soap, and vigorously dried them with a crispy white paper towel. She put a pair of latex gloves on her freshly manicured long-fingered hands and pulled a few white sanitized ruffled napkins. The loud sound of the trashcan that broke the cold silence was a last reminder about the roach’s existence. With professionalism Claire disinfected the place.

Strategy

The ugly truth included a stroke, global aphasia, and right-side paralysis. The doctor had not attempted to sugarcoat his verdict. Vegetative state. Dad did not show any awareness of self or

environment and had lost his ability to interact with anything. Purposeful responses to external stimuli were absent, as was evidence of language comprehension. Sometimes his eyes opened and looked out to nothing and nowhere. He did not recognize anyone. He could not move. He lost all ability to speak or communicate in any way.

Dad's crumpled, small-as-a-child-like body rested in a wheelchair that faced a corner of the room. The whole picture broke my heart. Why would someone leave a person in a wheelchair to face the corner? Isn't confinement to a wheelchair punishment enough?

I moved Dad and the wheelchair closer to the window. I noticed that his eyes fixed on an old oak tree. I put his finger to his lips to remind him of the story he had told me, implying that nobody would see him in the tall grass—in a way, I repeated the same ritual he had repeated many times before—and then slowly pointed at the old oak with his index finger.

"Dad, he is sitting there and I can see him too." I whispered into his ear in German, with the hope that maybe learned languages could be stored in the other hemisphere of his brain undamaged by the stroke. Dad looked at me intelligently for the first time since the stroke had occurred.

"Dad, you owe your life to that little boy, just treasure the time that is left," I whispered. A corner of the left side of his lip trembled. A tear formed in the corners of his eyes. I doubted that he would easily give up. My father possessed an incredible ability to enjoy life to the fullest extent, despite overwhelming odds and his fragile health. Despite all the suffering that he had gone through during his life journey, my dad has never lost his thirst for life. His appetite for laughter always had such an incredible power. I always believed that his sense of humor could dismantle any force, and his inner spirit just could not be broken. He treasured every moment as a starving boy would treasure a loaf of bread.

Blind to Hear

Dad had only international travel insurance. In the hour it took to verify coverage after his arrival at the emergency room, the opportunity to administer the drug that could have made a difference was lost. The four-hour time window that had started at the onset of Dad's stroke, when the tPA drug might have dissolved the clot and improved blood flow to his brain, passed without administrative clearance to administer the drug.

Despite what we, his family felt, his strategy was to push us away, to keep his misery to himself. A few days later, when my dad was transferred from ICU to a regular room, he withdrew himself from the reality. He pretended that he had not recognized anyone, but I noticed when a family member would come into the room he always turned his head away. Depression forced him to hope that if he did not participate in any treatments or therapies he might rush faster to his end. I knew he wished to end his misery. At the same time, the hospital was reluctant to offer the rehabilitation services Dad desperately needed.

History had once again completed a circle, returning to the same question concerning the value of life. The hospital's primary concern was the payment for services covered by Dad's medical insurance rather than the health and well-being of the patient. When I raised the issue to the management of the hospital, the vice president of the hospital, Mr. Maggot, addressed the issue by attempting to frighten my family with threats of calling Homeland Security. He even threatened us with deportation.

Why do people ignorantly assume that an accent is indicative of illegal immigrant status rather than competence in multiple languages? Hard as it was to believe, I came to realize that the practices of the hospital were consistent with their business model. It seems that the same freedom that I took the oath to protect by becoming an American citizen also permits the creation of allegedly non-profit health service providers that insist on putting the bottom line of their financial statement first. The hospital where my dad was treated is a part of a nationwide, faith-based nonprofit with billions of dollars in revenues. I always assumed that a nonprofit would be more amenable to providing *pro bono* services to the indigent, or even free healthcare to those who cannot afford to buy insurance. At the very least I thought they would administer time-critical medicines without delaying until they had read the details of the health insurance contracts drawn up by insurance companies. Sadly, this is not the case. The only difference between this non-profit and a for-profit business seems to be that a non-profit hospital does not pay taxes or dividends to shareholders. Nor do they, apparently, provide time-critical meds to patients in critical condition. Instead, this hospital allocates funds squeezed from insurance companies and patients' copayments to executive compensation, including private jets for CEOs, hundreds of thousands of dollars in bonuses, and golden parachutes for retirement. It seems that CEOs of those non-profits

are the concealed owners of all business income which ends up in their own pockets through salaries that are at least five times higher than doctors' salaries, but without paying any corporate taxes and avoiding any requirement to provide help to the needy in any discernable way. It is a monopoly that treats patients as nothing more than the roach from my father's room that fragile Claire, with her tiny foot, is able to step over without knowledge of having done anything wrong. Is it just simple ignorance? It seems that life is priceless, but it is also perhaps the most profitable business. The administration of the hospital simply hinted about the price tag that had been glued to life. Perhaps I had been blind to hear. Instead I turned the force of their cruelty against myself. I felt at fault: because I had no knowledge about ischemic strokes beforehand and because I was unfamiliar with the way the healthcare system in this country works. Also, I could have brought my dad to another hospital—one that may have been more amenable to addressing his needs. Finally, I considered myself at fault for recommending the purchase of an insurance policy before the flight, and even more at fault for inviting my parents to visit their grandchildren in the United States. Will my wound ever heal and stop bleeding?

Present

In the end, dad's insurance covered all of his treatments. The war with the hospital bureaucracy is over, but the rage still overflows. Am I still searching for ways to justify why it had happened? One positive result of my effort is that the hospital is now required to have a neurologist on duty even on weekends. Who knows whether they follow that ruling, or whether they have found some way around it?

I was not fighting to extend my dad's life, but for the quality of what remained of it. Eventually, Dad was transferred to the National Rehabilitation Center, where an intern position for a German-speaking occupational therapist was created to assist him. Apparently, different sides of the brain are responsible for learned and native languages. My dad was able to recognize only German at first. I searched for professionals who were passionate about their work. I was happy to find that not all healthcare facilities are driven by the performance of the bottom line, but are genuine medical research institutions. We have been fortunate to find some that actually appear to put the needs of the patient first.

Throughout this ordeal, I have been blessed to meet a number of people who perform miracles every day. To my fascination, Dad regained a degree of ability that allowed him to solve algebraic equations written in columns. Unfortunately, he could not recollect or identify any letters. He could eat on his own but only after someone would put the fork in his hand. He still cannot take the fork himself no matter how hungry he may be. Even though Dad cannot speak, he seems to understand his native Ukrainian. When Dad was cleared to fly, my mom decided to return to Ukraine. I admire my father's strong will—a will that allows him to overcome whatever challenge presents itself. My monologue “conversation” about that little boy who saved my dad's life may have been the most powerful medicine that gave my dad strength to fight against despair. Despite all the hardships and pauses that have altered his life journey, my dad's kind smile still has the power to affect anyone he meets. My mom inspires me with her optimism. One could say that it is just the denial of reality, but she remains hopeful that one day he will be able to talk to her again.

My dad has survived war, famine, and three strokes. He is living through his second war in Ukraine, this time with neighboring Russia. One day on the way to the hospital, with the wheelchair in front of her, while waiting to cross the road, my mom and dad counted the cars that passed by in a funeral procession. They counted seventy-six coffins. Mom talked about war and fate. She emphasized that all those people, much younger than her, lost their lives and that Ukrainian hospitals are overflowing with boys a bit older than eighteen, who have lost limbs, or are confined to wheelchairs. She added that I must stop blaming myself that the hospital had not administered the tPA drug to Dad in time to curtail the full effects of the stroke. She said that an insurance card should not be an issue because no one can put a price on life. What happens, happens.

Is everything that happened to my parents caused by a circular repetition of the past? How could I know that in war-torn Ukraine my father would have received the necessary medication in a timely fashion? Nevertheless, it still seems to me that it had been in my power to change the outcome. Driven by my guilt, I continue to wonder. I regret that I did not agree to visit my parents in Ukraine, and insisted that they come to see me in the United States on a trip that very nearly cost my dad his life. My desire was to share with them something that only belongs to this country—a time when Hanukkah and Christmas can be celebrated by one family, when

Confluence

diversity of customs and traditions unite in one holiday season, and the festival of lights transcends, maybe just for a moment, the darkness of our suffering, illness, tragedies, and even death.

I can hear my father's voice when he replied to my invitation. "It will be my last flight," he said. Had he known his own fate? Maybe one day he will answer.