

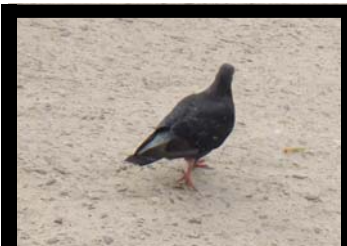


### Digging roots through old files (July 2007)

My father arrives in the dark at my house in Northern Virginia, three hours before our flight to Warsaw, Poland is scheduled to depart. Our journey is primarily to read through family spy files, released for the first time by the Polish government.

The drive to the airport is about 15 minutes and we arrive early. That's his style. The potential of anything going wrong at the airport is to be avoided at all costs, even if I have to miss out on sleep. I'm used to passing hours in airports with him. We're flying business class, so we have a lounge with free stale cookies and mixed drinks. But instead we choose to pace. We walk up and down the long hallways of Dulles Airport, with me having to take almost two steps to his every step. I don't ask him to slow down. I want him to work out that excess energy, the anxiety that sits so deeply within him. We may potentially learn some very dark family history, potentially find out which friends were not really friends, find out what we still can't even anticipate. Sometimes family secrets are best left in the past.

Once in Warsaw, we rent a small apartment that looks out onto the old castle courtyard, in historic old town. I stroll the streets in the evening for hours, listening to musicians at every corner and hearing the chatter of Polish lingering around me. I like how I don't exist here. No one knows who I am or why I am here. I spend my mornings sitting in the large open window with a deep sill, hearing the sweeping of the streets, the click of high heels on the cobblestones below, the dance of pigeons on the rooftops. I look into the apartments across the way, and spend hours one evening watching a tall woman in white overalls paint the room a deep, dark blue. The voyeur in me is captivated in being able to look into these lives, so different from my own, simply because I was pulled out of all this at the age of three.



### Family Spy Files

My father and I enter the silent high-ceilinged room where a stack of brown files tied with cream ribbons waits. The historian checks our passports, noting down the numbers and details carefully. He moves too slowly, as if building a tension that could only be broken by a group of men knocking down the door and dragging us to a holding cell. How many rooms out there contain as many secrets? Although I try to maintain my American sense of safety, I feel violated already. The eyes of the historian capture all the countless eyes that have been watching my bloodline for decades, pulling me into distant times of distrust until I feel like I'm alone in a strong sand-storm, with the tiny grains of sand grinding into my skin, my eyes, forcing me to curl up within my own body on the desert floor. The sand almost dulls my intrigue over the fact that I'm about to read late-night interrogations of my family members by the Polish secret police and by the KGB. The room's large window overlooking a busy street reassures me, but the space holds a hint of burnt out homes, late night invasions, and musty smoked cigarettes.

The room is set up like an empty classroom, with four rows of two-person tables lined up behind one another. My father sits at the table behind me, although we could sit next to one another. The distant historian sets the files before us on the table, explaining how we must sign a tracking registry to view the materials within. The registry is a listing of names and dates, much as an old library listing of names. There are lists of names already on each registry and I wonder what all these people wanted with my family's records. And why had they been granted access before I was? The files have clearly been stored with care over the decades as they are crisp and spotless. With the files before us, we both pause. I look into my father's cold blue eyes, concerned that his movements are too sharp. If I feel my hands wanting to tremble, what is this moment like for him? Will these files





push him even deeper into himself? I have known few men as contained as my father, and I do not enjoy people within their containers. Yet I built up my containers as well. I can read him and without discussion we decide to begin with my father's file.

"Your file was destroyed," the historian immediately shares with us before we can even open the file. All that remains is a single piece of typed paper stating that my father was politically persecuted. It is this very piece of paper that moved us quickly through a refugee camp and into a small American college town. There is no listing of his high school friends or professors or past girl friends as watchers. He'll never know who recorded his movements. I can sense my father's relief.

We now face the stack of files that is on my table. What is in these files won't be as personal, as everyone is long dead. There is no one way to begin going through stacks, so we work separately and I choose my first file at random. Each file is clearly organized, with indices and page numbers, and mostly typed notes kept meticulously over the years. My breath catches as it becomes clear how much energy was invested into watching my family.

The first file in my hands is one of my great-grandfather's files. He's the one at the core of all that transpired. To protect me, my parents raised me outside of my family history, and I learned more from my great-grandfather's Wikipedia page before this trip than I had heard over a dining room table. I knew from early childhood that he had been the prime minister of Poland's government in exile after world war two, but the meaning of that was lost on me. Only a decade ago did I come across a New York Times article about his unsuccessful meeting with America's president, when he tried to establish Poland's government in exile as the proper government. Yet America chose to support Poland's Communist-government. What would my life have been like had the decision



been otherwise? The details, my parents shielded from me. I knew that I had postage stamps with my great-grandfather's face in my stamp collection, but what earned him that honor was not discussed. I only learned of his involvement with numerous assassinations through Wikipedia.



I sit on the hard chair and flip through his file which focuses on his young girlfriend who later became his second wife. A small envelope in his file contains her documents; her face peers at me from the past, so strong-willed and lavishly beautiful. I find her Red Cross identification badge in the file and I flip it in my fingers, imagining it in her fingers. I sense the coolness of the cobblestones under her feet as she walks swiftly with this badge tucked into her purse. Her name is false on the identification card, as is her age. I imagine her with this fake document, walking through the nights, sneaking through back alleys. She played a large role in the underground, but the details are lost to time. What remains of her now are a few photos, including ones of her as a younger teen; a vibrant and strong young woman holds my eye from the past. I almost met her once, but the visit was cancelled at the last moment. Only now do I regret that immensely.



The next file I pick up contains actual spy reports: tasks, assignments, and summaries of completed chores. "Find out where they are getting their medications." I wonder at this task. Did the communist government think they were getting it through sources from the western world? Did they want to intercede and poison them through the medications? My grandmother was already suffering from cancer. It pains me to know what little medical care she had available. "Find out when they last spoke with the Prime Minister," my great-grandfather. I read a list of who attended a family funeral and their notes about my great-grandmother having a fit and yelling at her son for not visiting her enough, "a good son should visit at least annually." I try to envision my grandfather as a young adult at







that funereal, well aware of being watched, and probably embarrassed by the scolding. Is his soul here with us in this room? Are all their souls?

I stop my slow reading and share some of this with my father. He wistfully admits that his father had difficulties with his mother's wildness, her lifestyle. I think of this great-grandmother of mine who raised two boys during a war while being in the midst of leading a woman's fight for freedom. This great-grandmother of mine who smuggled bombs under her skirts and died falling off a tram that ran her over.

Tucked in casually into one of the files are the clear words hidden from my family until this moment. The words describe my great-grandmother's death, her planned death, "as she was meant to be pushed off the tram." And in this instance I learn that my great-grandmother had been murdered, as our family had assumed, but this is our first confirmation. The words are there in the file, typed into a report as if just another note. She died early in life and did not even meet my father who was a young boy at her death. I look at my father. We reread the words aloud several times. Their meaning in Polish could be taken several ways. It is not a clear admission of her murder, but this is the closest we have seen. There are no photos of her in the file, but the portraits I have seen show her as boldly handsome, more masculine in nature. Her blood flows in me. How much of my restlessness is tied to hers?

I pause my slow reading, wishing I had studied my Polish more intently. I look out the window at the cars passing. I try to sort the generations into an order in my mind. Another file contains a word for word interrogation with my grandmother just after my grandfather's arrest. The interviewer's name is known to my father; he tells me that the man was a brutish and violent interrogator. That's all he says. That frames the words in the file differently. 11:50 p.m. is listed as a start time. Could my grandmother ever have imagined that I'd read her word for word nervous answers to the secret police? Most of



the questions deal with her sister Lidia, whose first husband was a successful activist who cracked into the communist government in creative ways. He also abandoned my grandmother's sister for a mistress, Emilia, and left his wife ill and having to work until the day of childbirth. She died soon after and his mistress wanted to raise that child as her own. I ask my father about this daughter, who would be his half-cousin. He remembers her vaguely, sometimes coming over for dinner.

"She is a professor here in Warsaw," he tells me. What? I had never heard of her. "Tata, let's invite her for dinner, she should know about what's in this file." Most of my family was murdered and I long for meetings with anyone who shares my blood, as my family now only contains five true relatives on this world. And here I discover that one, however distant, is a literature professor at the university. But the dinner never happens.

I reread the report's description of my grandmother's anger at her sister's husband, at his cruelty, at his wanting to keep the daughter apart from the family. A second slip filed after the report claims that my grandmother had tried to appear calm but was clearly nervous. My father shared that she was there to try to get her husband released from jail, did she have to violate her sister's trust to do that?

I reread the sentences. I try to keep track of all the new names and their connections to one another and to me. Referring to my side notes and checking in with my father helps. It's impossible to process all the information. I can not even keep track of the names and stories. We're granted access to photocopies of all the material.

Our historian brings us more paperwork, with forms needing my grandmother's and great-grandmother's maiden names. My father pauses. He doesn't recall the names. We ask our historian and he says he has them in other files. Bringing over a printed page off Wikipedia, he points out their maiden names. We complete our family spy file requests.