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Katyn: 'The tragedy never ends'

Ellie Rose was researching the death of her great-grandfather in the Katyn massacre of 1940, in which 22,000 Polish officers and intellectuals were murdered. Then, two weeks ago, the president of Poland and 95 others died in a plane crash en route to commemorate them. She finds that the atrocity of 70 years ago continues to affect her family today

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The Guardian, Saturday 24 April 2010

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Ellie Rose's grandmother, Anne Prochowska, in the 1940s

Two Saturdays ago, as the sun shone brightly on London, I awoke to a text message from my father. "Turn on the news," it urged, compelling in its brevity. I like my Saturday morning lie-ins. I work late in a bar on Friday nights and I usually need eight hours of sleep. But although the sound of my phone had woken me after just four hours, I did not roll over and go back to sleep. I was stirred by this cryptic envoy, this little bit of mystery. When I blearily opened up my laptop and clicked on to a news website, there it was – the news that now, two weeks later, we've all had time to digest, but that at the time of reading, left me open-mouthed with disbelief. The Polish president, Lech Kaczynski, was dead.

I can understand why this would be of only fleeting interest to the average 22-year-old bar worker, but for me it was enough to send a frisson down my spine. I sat up in bed, disturbed. I spent several hours on the internet devouring updates. Then, spurred on by an odd compulsion, I put on a smart dress and black shoes and took the tube to the Polish Social and Cultural Centre in Hammersmith. There, I laid some tulips and lit a candle, before wandering home, troubled.

I did those things because I was deeply and genuinely moved. My father is half Polish, which makes me a quarter Polish – not so very Polish, one could say. But for the previous two weeks I had spent most of my waking moments delving into my family history, and particularly into the death of my great-grandfather, who was killed in April 1940 in the Katyn massacre.

The day Kaczynski died, he was travelling to Smolensk, Russia, to remember the 22,000 Polish men murdered on that day. The dead included officers and intellectuals, executed without trial by Soviet secret police, in an act historians believe was Stalin's attempt to cripple Poland's elite, to reduce the nation to a population in servitude to him.

I had visited my elderly grandmother to hear her account of her father's disappearance. I discovered a tiny diary that she had kept secretly while she was interned in a Soviet labour camp in Kazakhstan and had it translated by a kind Polish restaurateur, called Anje. I visited a psychotherapist who specialises in trauma to ask him about the long-term effects of my grandmother's experiences on her and our entire family. In short, I submerged myself in the story of Katyn. It wrapped me up. There was vodka-drinking and tears.

Faced with the news that Saturday, I couldn't believe the irony. At the same time as I slumbered, satisfied that I had finally done justice to my intriguing family history, Kaczynski and 95 others were killed in the very same place as thousands who were slaughtered 70 years earlier, during a journey to commemorate them. The coincidence was so cruel that you couldn't make it up.

"This proves it, Eleanor. The tragedy of Katyn is never-ending," my father said as we discussed the victims that day – and this, I think, goes to the core of the matter. Because while there have been grief-filled commentaries on the plane crash, tributes to Kaczynski, and optimistic forecasts of how Polish-Russian relations might move forward after decades of barely suppressed hostility, I still feel the most important story hasn't yet been told. The truth is that the Katyn massacre destroyed lives and filled the innocent hearts of family members with uncertainty, followed by an encroaching and crushing sense of loss. It still affects the relatives of victims to this day. My great-grandfather's death changed my grandmother irrevocably, and she still bears the scars.

I have always wanted to quantify the loss, to find out exactly what it has meant to my family, because the truth hasn't always been forthcoming. Stories were told, but only in part. So, when I visited my grandmother earlier this month, it was to prise open a box of secrets from which only disjointed fragments of truth had been spat out, in no particular order – round the dinner table, or overheard through the walls at bedtime – for as long as I can remember.

My grandmother usually cracks open the gin about noon, so I made sure to arrive in the morning. I wanted her to be as lucid as possible because I knew the act of remembering would be hard for her, like teasing out a splinter buried so deeply under the skin that you wonder if it will stay wedged there for ever.

"Come, *kochanie*. Get yourself a drink," she said to me, sitting down. "You know where everything is." I opened the fridge and took out one of two juice cartons from the door rack, pouring myself a glass of cranberry. I placed the carton back inside the door.

"No, darling, the other side," she said. For my grandmother, everything must be exactly in its place. After all, she has learned that her house – in which she has lived since she settled in England 50 years ago, and which she refuses to leave, even to go to the doctor – is the only world she can hope to control.

Once I had a glass of juice, and she had poured herself a strong gin and water, she remembered far more than I thought she would. She seemed much more willing now, in her twilight years, to tell me her history. "Ellie, darling," she said, gripping my hand. "I will tell you about it, if it will help you."

When the second world war began in Poland, on 1 September 1939, my grandmother was 11 and living in Lwów, a thriving town in eastern Poland. "It was dreadful. We could hear the Germans bombarding the train station and the airport and the cars stopped driving in the streets," she began.

"One afternoon, two weeks later maybe, after terrible bombardments, we started hearing the first guns. The Germans were coming closer. The shooting was terrible. They came to our house and, well, the dogs were at the gate. We had three Alsatians, big chaps, that the staff looked after. They almost went for the Germans, and the bloody Germans, they shot them."

The Nazis advanced into Lwów, but they did not stay long. On 17 September, they were replaced at the barricades by the Soviets, with whom they had signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact to carve up the territories of Poland between them. The Germans withdrew, and the Russian troops soon overwhelmed the Polish defences in Lvov. They raised a red flag over the town and played Russian music in the city centre. They came to my grandmother's house – a large, upper middle-class family home with servants and a grand piano.

"I remember that my mother said to me, 'Darling, I'm sorry, I can't stop them. We've only got one room, that's me and you together, but they're going to take the whole of the house,'" she told me, her eyes filling with tears. "And they took him."

"Oh, *kochanie*, I remember my daddy," she continued. "Sometimes if he came home early when I was just about to go upstairs to be put to bed, he used to play Chopin for me on the grand piano in the dining room. He played so beautifully."

My great-grandfather's name was Jan Josef Prochowski. He attended university in Krakow, where he was a full back on the college football team. Records from the team show he was about 5ft 6in, and weighed 11 stone. He then became the manager of an armaments factory. We now know that he was taken to Ukraine, where he was interned for some months. He was then summarily executed under the Katyn death warrant, sealed with Stalin's signature. My grandmother was told many years ago by family connections that the Russians had done "things to him too terrible to tell", but she did not know for certain where and when he had been killed until the Ukrainian list of victims was made public just a few years ago. He was 39 when he died.

But the horror didn't end there. Some months after her father disappeared, my grandmother and her mother were seized by Soviet officers at midnight, told they had 20 minutes to pack a few paltry belongings, and deported in cattle cars to the north-eastern steppes of Kazakhstan, close to the modern city of Semey.

They spent two years languishing there in one of the infamous Soviet labour camps where hundreds of thousands of Poles met their deaths. They were forced to live in a ramshackle hut, sleep on wooden boards, and work through the night in freezing cold winters, often with no flour or bread for weeks at a time. They were forced to make bricks, which was hard work in the freezing cold. My grandmother's front teeth were knocked out by a guard who beat her for losing a tool.

The two finally escaped to Kenya after the Soviet-Polish agreement was signed on 30 July 1941, allowing amnesty to incarcerated Poles who were willing to fight for the Allies against Hitler. They procured fraudulent documents stating that my great-grandfather would fight for the Anders army, though he was by then already dead. Once in Africa, my grandmother did her best to forget the killing and the camp. She set up home in Kenya, made new friends and found a job, and later, a doting husband; but the experience did irreparable violence to her that is visible now, as she grows old, more than it ever has been.

At 82, she telephones my father incessantly, and hoards possessions with sentimental value, terrified that somebody will break in to her home and take her things away as the Soviets once did. She will not leave the house. She has returned to Poland only once since she left and has consequently forgotten how to speak her mother tongue. She has also developed some obsessive-compulsive habits, placing handkerchiefs around the

house in various patterns and complaining when they are moved. Once beautiful, strong and full of the instinct to survive, she is a woman ravaged not only by the memory of her wartime experience, but also by a series of later losses – those of her husband and her only daughter.

John Schlapobersky, a psychotherapist who specialises in the treatment of trauma, told me: "There is a vulnerability built into the personality structure of someone who has undergone major trauma that is in many cases lifelong, but hidden from view until there is a precipitating factor. This is a picture of an 82-year-old who has endured the not distant loss of a daughter and a husband. But the shadows that lie behind those losses are the same matters that now evoke your tears."

He was right – thinking of the camp and her father, I had begun to cry.

Schlapobersky told me it was likely my father had been the subject of what he calls the generational transmission of trauma; violence was handed down to him. Hearing the disjointed details of the cruelty inflicted on his mother every day of his early life had to be extremely difficult for a child to deal with. It's a phenomenon dealt with in many studies of Holocaust survivors' children, and in Anne Karpf's autobiographical text, *The War After: Living with the Holocaust*.

"I have been affected by the knowledge of my mother's history," my father confirmed when I spoke to him later. Although outwardly extremely resilient, those who know him acknowledge he is unusually sensitive to personal attack. He feels a responsibility to his mother that at times weighs heavily on him, and he is ambitious with his projects to a point at which it is difficult for him to meet his own unusually high expectations. It seems to me to come from a determination to make his life matter, and I believe he suffers from it.

It's a subject that touches my own heart too, but as Schlapobersky was careful to point out, I have lived apart from my grandmother for most of my life, and been sheltered from the stress of hearing the violent stories relentlessly repeated. Although deeply saddened by the events of the past, I am proud of my family history, for there are some positive aspects to enjoy.

"It sounds like your grandmother and her mother are the beneficiaries of qualities of fortitude and farsightedness and sheer cleverness, to know what to do when everybody else was completely at a loss – and you carry that too," Schlapobersky told me. The idea that I could have inherited just a fraction of my grandmother's resilience was a heart-warming thought; for despite her current condition, she was able to walk away from what was done to her family to work all her life, and bring up two children, one of whom went to Cambridge University and one to the University of Edinburgh. And my father has succeeded in everything he has put his hand to, against unusual and often unrecognised odds. He owns a successful small joinery, he is self-trained and independent, and he is known in his community as thorough, hardworking, and a formidable opponent in any dispute.

This is a thought that resonated with me, and still does. At 22, struggling to make ends meet in a harsh economic climate, I sometimes find it hard to see the way to a job, a life, and a family of my own. Moving away from home, going to university and launching a career – and doing it on a shoestring – has been difficult. But I'm determined to succeed and this idea of resilience – the suggestion that I could go through much worse and still survive – is like a cooling breeze in a world that can seem dangerous, chaotic and unfair.

If this thought is comforting to somebody like me, with little experience of real hardship, it must mean much more to true Poles, especially at this time. Poland is a nation of survivors, hurt by a series of historic losses, and survival therefore takes on a very vivid meaning. After remembering the dead and telling the old stories of Katyn, and after

grieving until they feel they can grieve no longer, perhaps they will comfort themselves with the knowledge of their resilience. I have found it to be a warm and redemptive feeling, summed up in my father's triumphant comment on the death of the grandfather he never knew: "The bastards tried to get rid of us, but here we are. And the fact that me and you are even alive, Eleanor – it's a miracle."

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