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Czeslaw Makiewicz: From Poland to America

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CZESLAW MAKIEWICZ:
FROM POLAND TO AMERICA

ARETHA LEMON

HONORS PROJECT

Submitted to the University Honors Program
at Bowling Green State University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with

UNIVERSITY HONORS

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Makiewicz Family Tree
Bronislaw Ojciec Makiewicz—Bronislawa Mama Makiewicz / Rudolph Morl—Katharina Morl

Czesław Opa Makiewicz (2/12/1919) — Martha Omi Morl (11/5/1923)

Hanka Makiewicz (6/15/1947)—James Brown (3/30/1947)
   Ellen Darby (8/26/1994)
   Machaela Darby (1/30/1996)
   A J Darby (10/29/1999)
   Colleen Darby (4/24/2001)
   Katarina Darby (5/22/2003)
   Bridget Darby (9/14/2005)
   Joseph Darby (3/15/2008)
   Brian Darby (2/22/2010)
Bridget Brown (7/3/1975)—Cory Sims (7/30/1972)
   William Sims (11/2/2007)
Sylvia Makiewicz (8/21/1948)
   Daniel Makiewicz (6/20/1979)—Beth Jackson (10/30/1980)
      Gabryela Makiewicz (9/13/2010)
      Anastazja Makiewicz (10/26/2012)
Liza Makiewicz (12/7/1950)
   Nicholas Makiewicz Broyles (3/12/1984)—Jennifer Sanch (4/20/1984)
   Alice Makiewicz (12/14/1953)—Gerald Cox (5/6/1950)
         Tanis Crawford (10/11/2005)
         Payton Crawford (9/30/2007)
   Genevieve Crawford (8/10/2010)
      Lily Crawford (7/31/2012)
      Calvin Lemon (10/18/1984)
      Ian Lemon (2/8/1988)
      Aretha Lemon (3/20/1991)
   Mark Makiewicz (6/9/1956)
      Kurt Makiewicz (9/11/1984)
      Dawn Makiewicz (7/11/1988)
   Timothy Makiewicz (3/11/1959)
      Isabella Robinson (6/1/2004)
      Maya Robinson (5/8/2007)
   Andrew Makiewicz (2/16/1962)—Marilyn Wagers (7/25/1967)
      Drew Makiewicz (9/20/1994)
      Carter Makiewicz (11/22/1997)

Introduction
Laughter rang from upstairs, and James Lemon smiled as he slipped away from his fiancé, mother, and sisters to check on his father and his soon-to-be father-in-law, drinking together in the basement. The stairs carried Carlton Lemon’s loud voice and his account of Korean mountains and plains up to Jim, and he paused on the stairs. His dad did not shy away from talking about the war, but he never seemed to take it upon himself to bring it up, either. The most he heard of it those days was how Grandma Opal never quite forgave her son for going across the sea to become Catholic, so he listened, surprised and interested.

During a break in Carty’s story, Jim descended the stairs a bit more to hear a response, a trade. Czeslaw Makiewicz was quieter, leaning back in the easy chair. He looked up at the ceiling, fingers tracing the bottle label of the beer rested on his knee. His voice, thick with his Polish accent, rolled over the words, tales of the European countryside under Nazi control. The weave of light and dark skin over his hands shifted every time he spread them out. When he laughed, he brought his eyes down from the ceiling, checking on his audience. Jim sat on the stairs, watching the veterans reminisce for an hour, and learned more about Czeslaw than he had heard from any of the Makiewicz family since he first started dating Susan. When he returned to the crowd upstairs, he turned to her. “You didn’t tell me Pop was in World War II.”

Susan’s eyes grew wide before she tilted her head in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“Pop.” Jim pointed back to the stairs. “He’s down talking to Dad about war. He said he was a gunner in a plane that was shot down when the Nazis invaded Poland.”
Lemon 4

His mother gasped from across the table as Susan frowned. “Jim,” she glanced over to her own mother, Martha Makiewicz, who just gave a composed shrug. “I’ve never heard anything about that.”

None of her siblings had. Perhaps time had healed old wounds enough to allow Czeslaw to finally talk about his experiences, or maybe it was the several beers involved, but, suddenly, there was a whole new side to him that they had not known.

That was thirty years ago.

Now, after celebrating his ninety-fourth birthday, the war is all Opa wants to talk about.

Time heals all wounds, supposedly.

For my family, this project started the day I announced my intention to major in Creative Writing at Bowling Green State University to the Makiewicz clan, as we call it. The aunts started hinting at a biography, widening their eyes, tilting their heads to the side with a small quirk of their lips. “Well, you know, Pop has all kinds of stories he could tell you. That’d give you something to write about, right?” This continued long enough that Czeslaw—now called the German term for grandfather, Opa—got used to the idea, hm-ing and mentioning how things were over in Poland, back when he was growing up.

I was not ready though. The youngest of Jim and Suzi Lemon’s three children, I was full of wonder at the college experience and bright-eyed for all the amazing works of art I was going to cast onto paper with nothing more than thoughts and a pen. I needed to learn more, my strengths, weaknesses, how to use both of them, and my limitations.

On the cusp of my senior year, however, I realize that this might be the last chance I may have to understand and pull his stories from the air around our family and onto paper. So I
borrow Dad’s digital recorder and spend a week living with Opa and Grandma Martha, renamed Omi by my generation, in their small home in a back corner of Dayton, Ohio.

Sitting in the front room, curled on the gray recliner-couch that serves as my bed during the stay and showered in the afternoon light from the windows behind the television, I ask Opa what the ten most important things he wants me to know are—the ten most important parts of his life.

“Well,” he laughs, folding long, wrinkled fingers over one another. He sits in the dark pink recliner settled in the corner, beside the wooden rocking chair covered in pillows that Omi usually sits in, and another window beside him shines on his thick glasses. “All my life is important!” His grin, happy and full of his own teeth, crinkles his eyes. I cannot help my answering smile and settle in for a long talk, a little intimidated by ninety years of knowledge.

“So I guess we start at the beginning, yeah?”

The beginning is harder to pin down that it seems, though. While my grandfather begins with his birth, so many other factors bled into his life from much earlier than that.

chapter 1

“According to my mother, she would say I am born on February the 12th, 1919. But my Christening, Baptized, you know, Baptized on May the 20th.”

Czeslaw Makiewicz was born on February 12th of 1919, though he celebrates his Baptismal date in May. The end of World War I. At the time, it was called the Great War
because there had never been a war of such magnitude, such bloodshed before in the history of
the whole globe, and it was likely thought that it would end all wars. No one thought that
another, more destructive war would begin in twenty short years. That kind of trouble was not
important, not to the country of Poland that finally had its own sovereignty after more than a
century.

Czeslaw grew up the youngest of five, Polish, poor, and independent, while the
government attempted to work itself out, and he was happy. He always has a contemplative
smile across his face when he talks about Poland, the same smile I believe I inherited whenever I
talk of my own home.

The smile is there, just the slightest curve of his lips as he leans back in the recliner, and
Opa claims that his first memory is of the Bolshevik Invasion of 1920, though it is rare for
anyone to keep memories from their formative years. Opa has always had an amazing
memory—he remembers the names of each of his great-grandchildren, now numbering in the
teens, and I have heard him recite the birthdays of all his grandchildren, and we are not a small
number either, aging from forty-five all the way down to fifteen.

So I can believe that Opa remembers an event from when he was only a year old, or that
he remembers an exact retelling of the same event from his mother, who he affectionately refers
to as Mama sometimes. Much like I imagine he did in Grandpa Carty’s basement all those years
ago, he looks up at the ceiling, not really seeing it, as he talks.

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1 In Norman Davies’ *God’s Playground, Vol. 2: A History of Poland*, he writes of the preparation
for World War I: “Under the threat of war, patriotic fervour mounted. Dissident elements seized
the chance to press for concession. Loyalties grew more loyal, critics grew more critical,
militants more militant, the Poles more Polish.” This quote inspired my thoughts that Opa was
aware of his nationality and loyal to it.
On a cloudy morning, Mama arranged Czeslaw in a sling on her back and picked up her basket of clothes, setting off through the trees separating the house from the river. A small river, it cut through the land only a few hundred meters from their home in Wazeliszki, a small cluster of maybe four houses a couple of miles from the larger town of Podbrodzie. Even in the dull light, the surrounding trees were green and full that summer. Mama took a deep breath, closing her eyes, and took in the mix of rye wheat, ready to pick, and the scent of coming rain.

The river flowed with quiet waves, but a whicker and pounding boots and hooves carried over it. Mama hesitated at the tree line, her fingers clenching around the basket of clothing. With their grey coats, *ushankas* blazoned with red stars, and guns, the Bolshevik soldiers would intimidate anyone. They crowded around the water, letting the horses rest for a while, and for the barest moment, Mama wondered whether she should turn around, wait for another day.

But life was not easy, and one chore could not be put off, even for the Bolsheviks marching by toward Warsaw. Mama took a moment to readjust Czeslaw on her back, a moment for peace and control, and stepped forward again.

Thunder growled in the distance, setting the more skittish horses on edge as Mama knelt by the water and set her basket beside her. Czeslaw blinked at the group of unfamiliar people, scrunched up his face, and wiggled in his sling. Mama usually hummed to him, a soft sound with only a touch of gravel from a long morning and a dry throat. That day, though, she did not.

From the corner of her eye, she saw an officer at the edge of the group watching her, but she focused on the movement of her hands, the careful unfolding of clothing and setting it in the water. After a moment, he sniffed loudly. Mama lifted her head up, her gaze guarded, and he reached into his saddlebag.
Mama’s shoulders drew tight, and her fingers twitched as something cold settled in her stomach. What was he reaching for? Something to hurt her? To hurt her baby? A gun? A whip? Or something else entirely—food? Swallowing around the lump in her throat, she told herself she could not hope for such a thing, not with the curious gazes of his soldiers watching them. Not after Russia had been one of the countries to fight over Poland, to try to drain the land to support its troops.

The officer turned back toward her, a book in his hand, and Mama let out a breath of relief. It was just paper and worn leather with a simple cross pressed into the cover, the holy book for the Russian Orthodox Church. “You.” The officer pointed to her and her baby. He made the sign of the cross over his chest. “This book,” he pressed his lips briefly to the spine. “This book get further than you, hm?”

Mama furrowed her brows, not understanding, but did not respond. What could she say? A call carried over the soldiers, and the officer sniffed at her one more time before returning his book to his bag and mounting his horse. Mama looked back down at her work, breathing through the march until the last Bolsheviks left her sight, gone to Warsaw.

I sit on the couch, withholding a low whistle at the story. That must have been close.

On the chair beside Opa, the recorder blinks its small red light at me and absorbs the silence that settles between us.

What did that officer mean? “This book get further than you, hm?” Opa laughs a little when he says it back to me, grinning, though he stumbles a bit and cannot find the correct translation for the holy book into English, but he does not expand.
Was he referring to how Christianity spread across the globe? One of the most successful traits of Christianity is its versatility, how it adapts to the world around it and spreads. Maybe that specific sect of Christianity and its dominance over any other religion in the Soviet Union? Or he could have meant his own travels with the book?

Opa’s laugh seems a little easier to explain, at least in my own head. He could be laughing at the memory itself, the memory of his mother, or the fact that he has gone so far from where he came from. The officer never made it past Warsaw—none of them did—and he could have been killed in the battles between Wazeliszki and the capitol, while Opa went through Germany and across the ocean. Smirking, I decide I can appreciate the irony, even if that is not what is intended.

The Bolsheviks were pushed back to Russia by the Polish army under the leadership of Jozef Pilsudski, the Naczelnik (Head of State), who also went on to lead a military force on Warsaw, demanding that President Stanislaw Wojciechowski stepped down from his office. Pilsudski denied the offer of presidency, but took up the mantle of Marshal of The Polish Armed Forces, becoming essentially the country’s military dictator without the negative title.

Opa mumbles about Pilsudski a little, but does not seem terribly interested in carrying on about him, instead asking if I know of the Treaty of Versailles. I do, and nod, naming a few of the facts I remember from high school history classes.

The Treaty of Versailles hammered out the nightmarish agreements that would lay the way for World War II. Germany was forced to shoulder the blame for the entire war—to disarm its entire military and to make reparations for the damages all across Europe, a sum of over 200 billion marks, though it was later reduced to 132 billion. At the time, it was equivalent to 31.4 billion America dollars—in 2012, it would be equivalent to 442 billion dollars. Defeated and
denied a representative at the negotiations, Germany could only submit. Years later, Adolf Hitler was a savior from the desperation that settled over Germany.

Some good did come out of the Treaty, however, and Opa makes sure I know that. Poland was its own country for the first time in 123 years and loving it, despite the consistent political turmoils. Called the Second Polish Republic, the land was finally free of Austria, Prussia, and Russia, though the last was not giving up easily. Unfortunately, but understandably, Poland was just as economically depressed as everyone country around it.

The Bolshevik Invasion was not the only attempt to conquer Poland from its neighbors, but the country remained free. For leverage, the government reached out to France, who shared Poland’s distrust of Germany and Russia, as well as a history all the way back to Napoleon Bonaparte and his Polish cavalry. Opa grins when he mentions it.

Romania became another ally, though it was less beneficial due to the two countries’ similarly failing economies.

Poland’s economy was a mix of five currencies, including the German mark, the Russian ruble, the Austrian krone, the German ostruble, all remnants of previous occupations and invasions, alongside the Polish marka. The marka was replaced by złoty in 1924 in an attempt to fight the hyperinflation of the post-war years. With all of the different exchange rates and the scattered bills and coins, there was little structure to link them all into a stable system. Opa talks about how his oldest brother, who he refers to with the Polish title for brother, Bracie, born in 1904, would go down to the river to fish, to provide salmon for the family to eat and sell.

I tap my foot, smiling, as Opa grins, pushes back his chair to bounce a little. “Once, we catch fifty fish, salmon, you know, to—to sell. Some of them weighed close—to fifty kilograms, I think, the big ones!” He laughs. “Made good money.”
Opa names off some numbers, confusing rubles and złoty for a moment, and I cannot even attempt to do the math in my head. I have never had to worry about money that way. Mom and Dad both have an excellent income, and though they do not buy everything for me, they provide the big things. The little things I work for myself, but I have never had to worry about where the next meal will come from. Listening to Opa though, I make a note to hug both of my parents, to thank them.

Money went just as quickly as it came in the Makiewicz family, though. Opa’s parents owned a restaurant once, before he was born, but they could not make it work, not for long.

I have to stand up, to stretch a bit, but Opa stays in his chair. He watches me for a moment, then the ceiling again when I sit back down. “My father was—drinker, and gambler.”

My eyes widen a bit, and I lean into the throw pillows on the couch. “Oh.”

“Sometimes,” he chews on his lip a moment. “Sometimes they didn’t know what to do with their money, rubles, you know.” I am grateful for the recorder, because I would otherwise never be able to keep the money straight. “Brought in thousands, you know, but when he didn’t have luck, and get drink, you know. And that, he would,” a grin suddenly sprouts across his face, and he chuckles. “He would gamble his clothes off!”

I cannot help my startled laugh. “Oh, dear.” The only point of reference I have for my great-grandfather is Opa, who calls him by the Polish word for father, Ojciec. So when he says “gamble his clothes off,” I imagine Opa walking through his front door in just his underwear, and it is too funny an image to not laugh. Of course, it is not complete without an imaginary Omi standing in the middle of the living room, scowling at him. With her fists on her hips, she would tut at him, waiting, before throwing her hands into the air. Her exclamation of “Ah!”
would hold the slightest roll of an “r” at the very end, as always, and I laugh a little more. It is an idiosyncrasy that both my mother and I have picked up.

Though he does not understand why I am laughing, Opa joins me after a moment with a fuller laugh of his own and a wistful twist to his lips.

Before Czeslaw was born, Bracie helped Mama most around the house and with his younger siblings, two sisters and one brother. He kept the fire strong as she worked in the kitchen, kneading dough and stirring soup. She stroked his hair whenever she passed and smiled at her girls, who played with her youngest. Altogether, it was a good evening, despite the frigid wind outside.

The wind that swept into the house when Ojciec stumbled through the door. Cheap vodka hovered in the air on his breath, and a scrap of cloth around his waist and socks and shoes on his feet were the only things saving him from the cold, and saving their children’s eyes.

Mama rushed to close the door against the cold, then to support Ojciec from falling over. He slumped onto her, letting her hold a majority of his weight as she led him toward the fire. “No luck t’night,” he slurred. Mama sighed and settled him beside Bracie before fetching something solid for him to eat and settle his stomach.

“No luck,” he said again. Bracie watched him. It meant that, rather than having absolutely no luck at all, the little money he did win at the card table was spent on the vodka eating through his stomach. “Will try again later.”

Bracie looked back at the fire.
Even as I refocus on what Opa is saying, I am aware of how unfair my imagining of Ojciec is. Gambling and alcohol are both addictions and can be horrible to work through, but do not necessarily make someone a bad person. Ojciec was likely not as thoughtless as I picture—after all, Mama married him, and Opa has some good memories of him. It does not change the fact that, beloved and loving or not, Ojciec was not as helpful to keeping the family provided for as he could have been. Should have been.

Mama’s father sold locomotives, a car dealer, Opa says, and he was able to buy the house and land that they lived on. It was originally owned by two brothers, and when one passed away, Opa’s grandfather bought his share. It was left for Mama, for which I am cynically grateful. In Mama’s hands, there was nothing that Ojciec could gamble away from them—no property, no money needed to pay for it like at the restaurant. The house still stands, Opa is thrilled to tell me, and he hands me pictures from when he visited it a couple years ago. A different family owns it now, passed on sometime during World War II, though the family grave is still marked by a cross. Two simple, small metal pipes welded together with a wooden sign tied around their joint. Rodzina Makiewiczow, Makiewicz Family, carved in cursive on the wood.

My cousin took the picture of Opa standing beside the grave marker, grinning, fists on his hips. I trace a finger over the cross, look up at Opa in his recliner. Idly, I wonder if he would prefer to be buried there, rather than here. I tear my gaze from him the moment I realize the thought, and stare at my thumb instead. Ever since Grandpa Carty died almost six years ago, I have tried to not think of another one of my family dying. It has gotten difficult, though, when Opa shows true signs of his age. He can get down on the floor and do push-ups better than his sons, it seems, but he has a neighbor mow his lawn for him, and he cannot sit still during long car rides anymore. It must be so different than the Czeslaw he tells me about.
Through her work for the farms around Wazeliszki, gathering rye from the fields during the harvest, Mama made sure everyone had food everyday, even if it was never much. Heavy bread and fish was the most consistent meal in the house, and it is one that Opa continues to eat regularly. She was also able to insure a stable education in the public system of Podbrodzie.

“That was about 1926, you know. Yeah,” Opa tells me. The last word is deeper than all the others, as if it comes straight from his throat. “That’s when I was—you know, I started school. 1926.”

I sit quiet as Opa talks about his brother, the one born in 1915. He called him Brat, a less formal title for brother, and he was ill. “He was sick, always sick.” Opa pauses, purses his lips a little bit. “And he had that pneumonia. About every second winter he had pneumonia.”

My eyes go wide, and wonder where I got my strong immune system—I have only been really sick a handful of times in my memory, so maybe the genes just skipped Brat. “Oh, dear.”

“Yeah, yeah.” The words are deep again, and he clears his throat. “That’s—he was going to school with me, together in the same grade!”

The image of two boys, one obviously older than the other but paler, walking down the road between Wazeliszki and Podbrodzie pops to my mind, and I wonder who was really taking care of who in that situation. Maybe Mama thought it would be easier for Brat with Czeslaw there—if he fell ill at school, Czeslaw could take him home, and Brat could watch over the baby of the family. It reminds me of when Mom would send my brothers, Ian or Calvin, to pick me up from school—Ian would hold my hand, but only to cross the street; Calvin’s truck roared, a big black lion that rumbled beneath my feet. But school for Opa was very different than anything I can imagine from my own experience.
Beginning at seven years old and first grade, public school in Poland continued for only eight or so years—Opa fumbles a bit on that point—and the state religion, the Roman Catholic Church, seeped its way into the classroom. The priest would come through a couple times a month with his Bible, and he would read the stories of Christ to the class. Opa shrugs a little, giving me conspiratorial smile. “He didn’t really teach us nothing, you know?”

My shoulders quiver a little in quiet laughter. I am not sure how to respond, because Opa loves the Church. He prays at least one decade of the rosary a day, and he has never failed to ask me where I go to mass every time I come home from college. I cannot tell if he means that the priest was less than engaging in his lessons, or if his lessons were ones the class already knew.

Whichever he means, Mass is where Opa’s legacy with women seems to begin—a Mass he went to with his class—and I cannot help but quiver for an entirely different reason, a sick discomfort that settles just behind my ribs.

Sitting in the hard pew beside the choir where the organ stood proud, Czeslaw followed along with the rhythmic prayers and familiar hymns rising up to the high ceiling, comforted in the knowledge that God was watching over even the poor, like them. At seven years old, his feet hung just short of actually reaching the stone floor, and he kicked them at the air. At the altar, the priest raised his arms, a smile on his wrinkled face, as he asked the congregation to please stand and pray with him.

Czeslaw shuffled to his feet, and the pretty little girl with blue ribbons in her hair beside him, a classmate, smiled at him. Biting his lip, he ducked his head a little. Her dress was a pretty white, clean and soft, and he knew that she was from one of the more well-off families in
Podbrodzie. His fingers fiddled with the hem of his own shirt, a coarser cotton than hers, worn by time.

He was not usually nervous around girls, especially not his classmates, but—she was really pretty that day. Her blond curls hung to her neck, held back from her face by that blue ribbon. But, Czeslaw decided, he could play, just like the other girl, the older one that watched him sometimes, taught him. *She* liked to touch him, so… He peeked at his classmate. So he could touch someone else, too.

The congregation chorused with rehearsed words, and Czeslaw tried to keep his eyes on the altar, but they slanted down to watch his hand. Her cloth of her dress was a little stiff beneath his fingers, and he reached further until he could *pinch*.

She made a small squeak and turned to stare at him with wide eyes. Czeslaw grinned when red flush sprang to her cheeks, and she jerked her head back to face forward. He could see the appeal of touches like that if they received such a reaction.

Except, maybe not if those touches ended in the blunt pain sprouting from his head.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Their teacher hissed under the murmur of prayers and pulled more sharply on his ear. “Where did you learn to do something like that, you foolish boy?”

Czeslaw winced, pushing onto his toes, trying to lessen the pressure on his ear, and he apologized quietly over and over. Beside him, the girl stared at the floor, her fingers tugging at the ribbon and the blush still bright on her face.

“*And the teacher saw it and said—and scolded me!*” Opa laughs. “So, well, there you are.”
I shake my head, a grim tilt to my lips because I remember where this is heading. When setting this visit up—well, he mentioned being sexually molested since he was three years old. I do not want to be the one to broach that subject, but I do not have to.

“I remember that I got—was sexually molested by the girl.” Opa pauses, drawing out an “ah” as he tries to get the words, and I cannot help him. “That—I dunno. I dunno. That—that—I was maybe three? Maybe four?”

“Wow.” What else am I supposed to say?

“Yeah.” He smacks his lips and swallows for a moment. “And that was—all through my life, I guess, I was attack’d. And, um… And seven years, I went to first confession—I went to confession three times, and I couldn’t say what I—the priest didn’t—didn’t get me, didn’t understand me, you know. Three times…”

Opa trails off, and I know. Maybe not everything, but I get it, as much as I do not want to. In a situation like that, what do you do? How can a child make an adult understand when the child himself does not understand? And confession is not as easy as the Church seems to make it sound.

Three times, Czeslaw went to church, a stone sanctuary, and knelt in the stuffy small room built into the wall. Only a square foot of metal grating to allow him access to the priest on the other side, and he tried to find the right words for that offense. Confession is the time and place to ask forgiveness of anything one has done, any sin committed. But how could Czeslaw ask forgiveness of something he did not know how to name? Was he wrong? Was she? Did she force him into sin, or was he just the victim of hers? He must have don something—anything—otherwise she would not have done that, he would not have been put through that. Somehow, it
had to be his fault—something he should have done, should not have done, that could have kept her away, kept it from happening.

Three times, Czeslaw walked out of the church, no closer to understanding or absolution than he was before.

My head falls back against the couch. I close my eyes. And I just breathe. Opa is not as bothered by the event as I expect him to be, as I am. How do I reconcile the vulnerable child he must have been with the strong man I have respected all my life? All I have ever known of Opa is the retired gunner and radio operator, never the child that still depended on the adults around him. I have to remember that he grew up very differently than I did. No electricity, no running water—it sounds like one of the fantasy stories I read as a child, that I still read, but Opa is both the one in distress and the one to save himself.

I have to remember that the vulnerable child pushed through the rough life he had, overcame it, and turned out as the wonderful grandfather I have. That kind of rough life, with none of the easiness I grew up with, is what allows a child to grow independent.

My thoughts must not take more than a minute to process, but my neck already aches.

“Yeah.” Opa glances down at me, smiles again, and moves on. I can only follow along.

“I remember this: I was hunger—hungry. Always, you know.” Opa scratches his neck, and I glance to the kitchen where Omi is tearing up lettuce for lunch’s salads. “Always. My brother would—was—my brother, he was born in 19—1904, and he was working there, because that—we poor, you know, and he was working railroad.”

The railroads in Poland began as a way to connect the largely isolated sides of the country. The western parts of Poland, once controlled by Germany, had little connection to the
former Russian territories in the East, and the major cities such as Warsaw and Krakow had no direct railroad links. The rails were meant to unify Poland, to strengthen the country against the waiting powerhouse countries, hovering just at the borders like vultures, coveting Poland’s territory and resources. As there was no large-scale network like that before in those lands, there was always work to be found by the steel river.

“My father, too. He work there. Until he died.”

Unconsciously, I flinch. Well, then.

Czeslaw was nine years old when Ojciec faded away working on the rail a ways from Wazeliszki. Standing in the doorway to the kitchen, one hand clenched into a tight fist and pressed against the frame, he watched Mama speak with the priest.

Ojciec did not got to Church often, and Mama did not completely approve of that characteristic, but it was just how Ojciec was. It was part of him, like the way he laughed too much. Like the smell of vodka and the spark in his eyes at the sight of cards. He went the day he died, though, or the day before, the priest was not sure.

The priest arrived at the front door that warm day in August, carrying a Bible, like the Bolshevik officer carried his book—worn leather, folded page corners, and a silk ribbon that was once gold glued into the seam. He held it close to his chest, protection and comfort in his hold. His other hand held a rosary of familiar wooden beads.

“He came to confession before he died,” the priest spoke with a soft voice, transcendent, like the one he used in his sermons, when the entire church was silent to hear his words. “Or perhaps it was the day before. I believe he was sleeping when the Lord called him home. He held this in his hands.”
Mama was pale, but she did not cry or tremble when she reached out, took the chain of beads between her fingers. Czeslaw remembered Ojciec’s hands, thin and shaking around his fishing rod when he dropped a catch off at home. His long fingers brushing through his wiry hair, and the cringe in his face whenever Mama persuaded him to drink water. “Vodka would be better,” he rumbled to Czeslaw later, but he drank the water anyway.

Czeslaw felt his fingernails bite into his palm, but he did not look away from his mother. What did Ojciec confide and apologize for in Confession? The drinking? The gambling? Being away from their family during his bouts of work? Or was he not sorry for those? They could have been a part of him that could never be changed, like his shining blue eyes. Perhaps they were permanent fixtures that could not be forgiven.

But Mama thanked the priest and stood in the doorway to watch him turn around, walk down the walk back to the road. She waited for several minutes after he was out of sight, as if waiting for someone else to pass him, stride toward the house. Finally, she closed the door and leaned her forehead against it, her dark hair creasing her skin. Ojciec was never coming home.

Silence hung over the house, even from Brat, who sat at the table, staring at the wood. Hesitantly, Czeslaw walked a few feet forward. “Mama?”

The strong woman turned around, eyes red but dry, and smiled. “Come here, Czes.” She held out her hands in offering to him. He stepped into her arms, wrapping his own around her in response.

Mama pressed a kiss to the crown of Czeslaw’s head, set her cheek on top of it.

“He had the um—some, maybe cancer, you know, on his mouth.” Opa nods to himself.

“He couldn’t eat much.”
I cannot help but think of when Grandpa Carty died. I was still in high school, my junior year, and my last visits with the enormous man had been heartbreaking and terrifying. Tall and loud, Carty was not someone who appreciated being cooped up, but the nursing home was necessary, and he hated it. Both times I went with family to see him there, I fled from the room halfway through the visit and walked the halls, because I could not cringe whenever he raised his voice to yell at Grandma Betty, Dad, or anyone else he could to get him “the hell out of there and home!”

When Ian and I were both home from school, Mom at work, and Dad visiting Grandpa, we were expecting the same routine as the past couple of days. Ian or I would forget to make dinner for when Mom came home, we would either order food in or forage through the cupboards for ourselves, then we would go off to our own things, shouting good nights down the hall whenever one of us went to bed.

The February air outside was frigid, and I had just gotten home from school when the phone rang. Ian poked his head, topped with his short red hair, out of his room when I answered, furrowing his brow when I froze. Aunt Denise, Dad’s older sister, spoke softly through the phone, and I stood completely still. Ian actually stood from his desk and came over to me. Simply looking at him, my mouth slack, seemed to be all he needed, since he nodded, shoved his hands in his pockets, and walked away again.

Dad came home the day after, and I clung to him as soon as he set his bag down. He ran a hand over my back, and I squeezed. “Come on, now. You’re going to make me cry.” Even though he laughed, he voice cracked just the tiniest bit on the last word, and I released him.

When anyone loses a figure that important to their childhood, their upbringing, they need the support of someone else.
Things were a little harder on his family after that. One of his sisters had already
married, but Bracie and Brat still lived with him and Mama, and they didn’t have Ojciec’s pay
anymore. So Bracie went to work on the railroads closer to home, fishing whenever he could.
Brat was too weak, too susceptible to illness to do anything strenuous, so he stayed at the house
outside of school. Mama went to work in the fields every summer, collecting the wheat, and she
picked up other jobs from the farms during the growing season.

“I was hungry,” he told me toward the end of one of our talks. “And sometimes, my
brother would go fishing. My mother, oh, in the winter, you know, my mother left something for
Bracie to eat, and I was waiting for him to eat, you know—to see if he had something for me!
And he had.” He nodded at the ceiling, and I wondered what secrets it held for him, but kept
from me. “That’s how poor we were.”

He did not sit around and wait for something to happen, though. Opa helped plant the
orchard around their house after he graduated from common school and middle school. They did
not have the money to send him to university, but he made the most of it anyway. Apples, pears,
and plums were planted, and the trees grew around them, leaving the air scenting of sweet fruit
and filled with the hum of bees nesting.

Chapter 2
When I was in elementary school, I wrote letters to my cousin. Emily and I were and are best friends, and we would continue our playtime adventures, update each other on the books we had read, or maybe even the movie we had seen. I would tell her all about my dog, and she would, in turn, fill me in on her cows—who had calves, who was rubbing their head against the ground enough to make meter-wide holes that she fell in. We continued through the hardships of our teenage years, progressing into e-mails when we were both given access to computers, which was so much faster that there were times we did not know what to say anymore. You can only recount events so many times in the same day, after all.

But I remember the snail-mail days: pouring over college-lined notebook paper, deliberating every word and asking my parents if I spelled everything correctly. Mom smiled in amusement, and Dad put on a huge grin with an overly-enthusiastic “Okay!” that never failed to make me laugh. Once the letter was finished, I scrawled my signature, careful to make each cursive letter tight and just the right touch of loopy—an autograph—and sealed the envelope with my latest attempt to avoid licking the disgusting tape. When the paper was decorated with her address, my address, a stamp, and any multitude of doodles, I presented it to my mother for transportation to the mailbox on her way home from work.

Then began the waiting.

I had predicting what day her response would arrive down to an art. Three days for my letter to arrive in her mailbox. A day for her to read it, write back, and mail her own decorated envelope, luckily coinciding with the post office’s day off. Three days for her letter to slip through our door. A couple of extra days if it was busy at the farm and she needed some extra time to write back. Then the process would start all over again.
Listening to Opa talk about writing the Polish Air Force Academy in May of 1935, I cannot help but wonder if he had the same confidence in his letters as I did in mine. He laughs as he mentions the friend, Brat’s age and graduated from public school a few years ahead of them, who went to the Academy, nicknamed the School of Eagles, the year before.

“He was home for Christmas, I think, and we met in a little café to catch up…”

Czeslaw sat at a table beside a small window in the café in Podbrodzie, bundled as much as his mother could make him against the cold. The air smelled of bread and coffee and salt, and the fire light danced across the ceiling from the opposite wall. He looked between the snow drifting through the streets and his friend whose crisp clothes, straight posture, and quiet voice spoke of a confidence that Czes did not remember for two years ago. He did not need to raise his voice to carry authority, but he was able to express everything he needed to anyway.

Around the fire, a group of rail workers on lunch break roared at some joke, and Czeslaw glanced toward them. Then his friend spoke, still watching the snow. “It’s good you know—the air force.” He smiled, a simple, content curve of his lips that Czeslaw could not repeat, not yet. “For people like us. Poor people. It’s good.”

Of course, it was. Like many military programs, the air force offered benefits that were luxuries in country-homes like theirs.

Slouching a little, Czeslaw nodded. “Well… that’s good!” His voice naturally rose in excitement, and his friend focused his eyes on him. “Let’s enroll!” They shared a grin, and his friend began telling him all about what he had learned already.
I cannot help but laugh at Opa’s tale. Meeting his friend in the café, changed by the air force, must have been surreal. At least, I imagine that way. I see this friend as an example of what Czeslaw became on his path to being Opa. Strong, confident, and content. But he was not that man, not yet.

In his younger years, he seemed so content with the answer, “Let’s enroll,” as if it really was that easy. It was not.

The Polish Air Force Academy was established in 1927, in Deblin, with the motto: Pro Patria Semper. For my country forever. It trained young men to be officers in the air force: gunmen, mechanics, radio operators, navigators, and pilots. The emblem is two eagles circling one another, the one above the other holding a sword in its mouth.

Out of the public school system, with no money take him to the universities, and little left beyond farming and fishing in Wazeliszki, Opa applied to the Academy. Once he turned sixteen in May, he borrowed the family horse and rode the three kilometers between home and the nearest post office.

There were no mail men, not then, so he had to ride back out to the post office every couple of days, checking for a response, because the post office had no way of bringing it to him. Each trip would begin with eagerness, hope, only for it all to fade when he arrived and there was nothing waiting for him. He did not waste those months, though. During that time, he planted the orchard around their house. And after three months of the same repetitive trip, Czeslaw received his response, orders to arrive before the 1st of September, and a train ticket.

Just one boy out of 10,000 applications, and just one boy of the 250 accepted. “It was—I did not know those numbers then, you know,” Opa says from his chair, grinning. “Those odds were against me, yeah? I was luck. Very lucky.”
Czeslaw was assigned to the school in the city of Pydgoszcz, a 700 kilometer train ride with a connection in Warsaw. It was the first time sixteen-year-old Czeslaw Makiewicz had been so far from home, and away for so long. Opa tells me that he remembers his mother riding with him to the train station, on her way to something else and to make sure the horse got home safely.

I bite my lip, look down at my hands, clasped over the journal in my hands. Mama must have kissed his face and hugged him fiercely, and I can only imagine that he hugged even tighter, never wanting to let go, but knowing he had to. From all his stories, Opa gives me the impression that he was rather close with his mother—he was her baby, after all—and their parting must have been terrible. I know that my own separation from my parents was not easy.

Despite how I took week-long trips away from home and my parents almost every summer after I turned seven, I remember the brick of dread I felt hanging in my stomach when I went to college. Those trips prepared me for the homesickness I knew I could and would feel—Emily often grew irritated with me about how I would begin to mope—but I never expected how overwhelming it would be when I walked out of the door, settled into the car, and watched the house fade from the backseat. Mom and Dad helped me move in to the dorm, took me out to lunch, and eventually drifted down to the lobby, where we stood, awkward in our silence, before they had to leave. I held on to Dad for a full minute, pressing my face into his sweatshirt and squeezing around his middle. He made an exaggerated choking sound, and I giggled, but did not let go. Finally, I switched to squeezing Mom. She placed one hand on my head and wrapped the other arm around my shoulders, holding me just as tightly as I did her. A kiss to my hair, and she promised to call me when they got home, and that everything was going to be fine.
Cell phones did not exist in 1935, not even as a remote possibility, and mail was carried across the country by train and horse, rather than the express trucks in use today. So Mama and Opa had no immediate form of contact for the months he would be away, learning to fight for and serve Poland. She must have clutched at her baby, reassuring herself that he would be safe. Nazi Germany was already stirring under Hitler’s early rule, but he would be safe in school. He would not be forced out to face them yet.

“I remember my mother brought me on the horse from the station,” Opa told me, glancing between the ceiling and the statue of the Virgin Mary on his mantel. “She was going somewhere else, I think, and when the train was leaving, I waved to her.” I imagined him leaning out the small window of the train, his one bag of belongings beside him on the seat, and waving his arm until she was out of sight. “Yeah, I remember.”

I cannot imagine the finality the situation given him. Leaving the only home he had ever known, leaving everyone he knew behind, for something he may not have truly understood. Well, I cannot imagine it completely, not perfectly, but the images come to me anyway.

The train sped through the countryside, and Czeslaw sat by the window, staring at the greens of August blur together with random dashes of red, white, and brown streaking through everything—farm houses, which he tried not to think of, he was already missing home. He watched the people get off and on the train at each stop, men in suits, women in dresses, men in overalls, and women in shirts and pants. Some looked poorer than he was; others seemed ridiculously rich in comparison.

The interesting mix of people kept Czeslaw’s attention for most of the trip, but he still clutched at his bag, settled at his feet. Mama had warned him to keep hold of it.
Hours passed, and the train reached Warsaw. Czeslaw leaned closer to the window, to watch the upcoming station, and his eyes widened when he saw the gaping hole in the ground in front of the train. He shivered when the tunnel swallowed them, metal and flesh and all, and he stared into the darkness, searching for any kind of light.

Finally, a few sparks appeared, and the train slowed down. The station was not as well lit as Czeslaw wished it was, but he waited for the train to stop completely, and stepped out.

A wave of noise washed over him with the heavy smell of smoke and metal, and Czeslaw pulled his bag tighter to his shoulder as he moved aside to let other passengers off. Almost everyone poured onto the platform, and he swallowed a sudden mouthful of saliva. Podbrodzie did not have this many people in its entire population!

Signs pointed down various hallways, indicating exits, other platforms and trains, and the maze of directions send Czeslaw spinning into an older man.

With a steadying hand on Czeslaw’s shoulder and a low voice, the man held him still for a moment. “Easy, son. Are you all right?” Dark brown eyes, shadowed by the poor lighting and the man’s hat, peered at him.

Czeslaw flexed his fist around his bag, shook himself quickly. He grasped for confidence and control, thinking of his friend and where he was going. He was not in Wazeliszki any long—he was on his way to the air force. He could not shake in his shoes anymore. “Yes, sir. Could you point me to the Pydgoszcz train, please?”

The man took another moment to look at him. “Yeah. Pydgoszcz is down that hall there.” He patted Czeslaw on the shoulder and pointed.

“Thank you.” And he was one his way again.
Once settled on the train, Czeslaw watched several other young men, his age or a little older, trickle from the platform to the train cars. Each displayed his own degree of nerves and excitement, including bouncing in seat, the inability to keep still, constant chatter, and multiple theories and speculations. Some sat silently, staring at the darkness beyond the window, the platform, or the floor alternately.

Czeslaw watched everyone else for a moment, before grasping his bag and joining a smaller group.

I pause in my musings, letting Opa continue into talking about the academy. What kind of teenager would Czeslaw have been, I wonder. Now, Opa is very outgoing, willing to talk to anyone who will listen, but he might not have always been that way. Looking at him, I smile a little, and settle back. I cannot imagine him as anything else, but I can ask him later.

“We had the—the new building at school,” Opa says, twisting his fingers a little bit.

“Brand new, for classes you know. And we had fifty-three! Fifty-three classes.”

My eyebrows shoot up, rising over my forehead and into my hairline, and he begins to list some of those classes off. Fifty-three subjects covered each year, growing more and more specialized as the students chose their area of expertise, for three years. Geography, physics, the Polish language and alphabet, technology, and several more, including military subjects. Strategy, shooting, and grenades, for example. I suddenly feel a surge of gratitude to my own twelve credit hour schedule, but any more, and I would burn out quickly.

“We had a, um—an older student living in the dorm or suite there, with us, for one month.” Opa hm’s with a smile. “It was the three of us and him. He—was watching us, I think. Teaching us a little, you know. Made sure we kept out rooms clean and made it to dinner on
time, you know?” Grinning, he mentions how the older student would help them keep their rifles in good condition and shining.

The food was good, Opa emphasized, in the new cafeteria with metal plates and utensils. The metal plates must have been new, different from anything Czeslaw had ever used before, because Opa laughs whenever he mentions them. The cafeteria, next to the kitchen, smelled like the café back in Podbrodski, except with the addition of tomatoes and more spices. “There was always soup.” Opa smiles. “Always soup, some kind of—of meat, and bread at every meal.”

It was good, just like his friend had said it would be.

The only problem, it seems was that it was really difficult to learn how to obey.

“Squadrons were based on height,” Opa says with a chuckle. “All the—the little ones on the end, you know.” All squadrons reported to the Squadron Leader and his Master Sergeant, who dealt with any trouble that occurred among the ranks. Opa never specifically states if he got into trouble, though he has this mischievous smile that I lean away from. “Had to learn, you know, to obey all the order.”

The cavalry stables, located just next door, always needed cleaning, and Opa makes it sound like anyone consistently causing trouble needed to lie with his rifle out in the field, praying that he would not roll into a pile of horse dung.

I laugh, trying to picture Opa getting into the kind of trouble that would cause such a punishment. He sounds as if he speaking from experience, though, wrinkling his nose and laughing, so I am not sure what to think. He never states any specific thing he could have done or did.

The closest I ever came to having to deal with animal excrement was when I was maybe six or seven. I sneaked into the backyard just before dinner, to the shed. I was intent on peeking
in on, maybe even cuddling, the kittens Mom was watching for a coworker. Five mewling, squirming balls of fluff stared up at me from the box, and our terrier whined and panted from the end of his chain several feet back. Mom had given me a look when she brought them home.

“You’re not allowed to touch them, okay? They might have fleas.”

Nodding like the good girl I was pretending to be, I watched the box, held above my head. “No touching” somehow became “no skin contact” in my head, and I stole one of Dad’s handkerchiefs from the laundry. It was getting washed anyway.

So I wrapped a black and white kitten in the thin cloth and held him up to my face with a huge grin. Faint memories of a farmhouse and barn cats roaming freely fluttered around my mind, and I brought the kitten closer to my face.

Only to feel something wet and foul-smelling settle in the handkerchief. Alarm was quickly followed by disgust as I opened the folds I had made around his back legs. “Oh, ew…” There was no hiding that from Mom, and she sent me to my room before dinner, while Dad closed his eyes and counted to five in his head.

An altogether very different experience, though it makes me cringe around litter boxes, and I cannot imagine sleeping surrounded by something much fouler.

Opa brings me back. “On Saturdays—no! No, Sundays. Sundays, we have—off, you know, and we go into town.” He still attended church regularly, spending his Sunday mornings there before exploring the town with some of his classmates.

Also every week, he wrote to Mama and his brothers, cherishing their responses. “They sent me a little money, you know,” Opa says with a grin. “I was very lucky, you know, that they give me that.” Every ten days, the class was given an allowance from their superiors, to buy toothpaste and things, even a haircut until they learned to do that themselves—Omi and Opa still
trim their own hair—so Czeslaw had some extra all the time, and he was not dependent on either source of money.

The first year passed relatively quickly, full of classes, drills, and basketball with his squadron. Then, from August 1st to August 31st, all students had a vacation, and Czeslaw rode the train for the 700 kilometers home.

Not much had changed. The trees in the orchard were taller, Brat was working for the mail and message service, but Mama still wrapped her arms around him in a tight embrace. For a month of flinching from unexpected contact, he relaxed completely, returning the hug. “I’m home.”

How do you come home from the majority of eleven months unchanged? You do not. It is impossible to assume that anyone could after being exposed to so many other stimuli. When I came to the first family gathering after I entered college, months into the semester, several of the things I said made everyone’s eyes grow wide before they burst into grins and laughter. “I can’t believe you just said that! Well, Hell, Aretha, I don’t remember hearing you curse once in your life!” The first few times this happened, I blushed, ducked my head, and grumbled about being in college too long. “Well, keep it up—you’ve got a couple more years yet.”

So what changed in Opa, I wonder, watching him laugh. Put through drills and trained to stand straight, I imagine him taller. At seventeen, he could be finishing his growth spurts, and he could stand taller than Brat. Or perhaps he just seemed that way. Mama would look him over, reassuring herself more than any letter could that he was still the same, prouder, more confident, maybe, but ultimately still her son. Once she was clear on that, she could set about reintegrating him into their daily lives for the next month.
“September 1st, the second year of classes start at the academy,” Opa says. “If anyone was late, well, they—they were out of luck, yeah?” He nods at the ceiling, but he does not smile, not yet. “Some, though… Some did not have that—that choice.”

Opa’s voice is quieter when he spoke of the funerals he attended at the academy—classmates that fell ill and could not get better. It was easier to hold the ceremonies and burials at the academy than send the body away, apparently, and he stood straight in the line, head high to honor a fallen comrade.

I stay quiet, let him take his moment, and smile when he jumps into the second year at the academy.

The second year began the specialization training. “Mostly mechanics, you know,” Opa says. “Because they learned to—to fix things, you know. My class only had maybe ten pilots.” Ten pilots out of 250, the rest were separated into mechanics, radio operators, gunners, and anything else that was necessary.

Czeslaw began as a wireless radio operator, and spent hours tapping out Morse Code even though he had to keep up with the more physical studies established the year before. “The exams,” Opa shakes his head. “The tests, you know. They were to see how many letters we could make in a minute.” He taps one finger on top of the others, and I cannot help but wonder what he is saying, translating to some imaginary person on the other side.

None of the students were allowed to touch a plane until their third year at the academy. They had to learn everything first. All the parts, controls, every fail-safe. Once they were tested several times, the teachers and officers decided they were ready.

An old plane wheeled out into the field, a little ratty thing with two wheels that could maybe get up to fifty miles per hour. “I remember,” Opa says, “Plane only had two wheels,
and—one broke on landing, you know, so we kind of spin a little bit, you know.” He laughs. “That is after three years.”

At the end of the year, as a final test, the whole class took a six-week camping trip out to the shores of the Baltic Sea. No plumbing, no electricity, with tents and hunting.

Listening to Opa talk, I bite back my smile. I am not a camping person. The one time I tried to spend the night with my brothers and two of our cousins out in their backyard, I could not handle it, and ended up running back to the house. The security of four walls and a solid door is not something I can give up easily, if at all, but Czeslaw persevered, and he recalls the experience with a grin. “I remember that, sometimes, we all cold, you know. So we build something that the wind didn’t get to us.”

Czeslaw helped the rest of his squadron set up a wind barrier in the hours before they were sent back to their tents. Logs, an extra tent canvas, and some rocks holding it all together in the sand made up their makeshift shelter, and they all huddled together behind it. Bodies pressed close, but the experience was filled with whispered stories and camaraderie, and they settled into the comfortable rhythm of the waves until they were called in for the night. The next morning, they would all set aside a towel, and dive into the salt water for a quick, frigid wash to start the day.

They did not have proper meals there like they did in the academy, and Opa lifts his mouth into this small, nostalgic smile, his eyebrows rising mournfully. “We had no milk, there. We had to buy some, if we could.” Czeslaw was lucky because Mama and Brat still sent him money.

Czeslaw was almost nineteen when he graduated from the academy in 1938. He does not talk about what the ceremony must have been like. Well, he will not talk about it yet, but I still
cannot help but compare my imagination with my own graduation from high school. Did he sit in chairs on the field outside the brand new building, like I did? Or did he stand? Was there a diploma of some sort? A medal? It is possible there was not a ceremony at all, as he was immediately attached to the 1st Regiment in Warsaw upon graduation, and he was off on his next adventure.

Opa leans back, tired from another hour of talking, and I shut off the recorder. Before either of us can drop off into a nap, though, he frowns, opening his eyes to look around the room. “I have a—a book, I think. From air force school.” With a grunt to get up and a moment to insure his balance, Opa shuffles over to a box I have not seen before, under the desk. “Should be right here.”

He sets the box beside me on the couch, and we look through the contents: a photo album, some envelopes, loose pictures, and three almost identical red and white books. “Here we are.” Opa reads the Polish title to me, and hands me one volume.

I brush dust off a corner and read the English translation, printed beneath the Polish. “The Polish Air Force N.C.O.’s Training School.”

“This is where I was sent after graduation.” Opa thumbs through the next volume. “Let’s see… Makiewicz… Here is the ‘S’s, so…”

With an amused smile, stifling my giggle, I reach for the last volume. “Here, Opa. This is L through O.”

“Oh!” He grins. “Yeah, yeah! I am in there.”

And, sure enough, there is a picture of Opa from the 90’s, and two columns of text, one Polish, one English, made up pages 777 and 778.
Makiewicz Czeslaw

LAC. WOP/A.G.

Born 12th May 1919 in Wazeliszki, Scwieciany district, Wilno province. He completed his elementary education in Podbrodzie in 1933. In 1935, he joined the “SPLdM” in Pydgoszcz, qualifying as a Wireless Operator in 1938. He posted from the School to the 1st Air force Regiment in Warsaw, and was enlisted, on 30th June into the Bomber Training Squadron, which was attached to the 213 Bomber Squadron. After completing his Wireless Operator / Gunner training on 30th April 1939, he was posted to the 217 Bomber Squadron. With his unit, he participated in the September 1939 campaign as part of the “Bomber Brigade.” While flying on an operational mission on 4th September to bomb German tank units on the Przedboz-Radomsko road, his aircraft was hit by the German anti-aircraft defenses and burst [into] flames. The crew [was] saved by having to force land on a young forest. One first impact, the pilot was [thrown] out of the aircraft and found by the Germans. [Makiewicz] was badly wounded and burned. He was ill for one year.

I glance up to Opa’s hands, shifting through papers in his box. Before I can say anything, Omi calls us over to the dining room for dinner.

Chapter 3
One of my aunts has two-dozen black and white photographs hanging on her cherry-red dining room wall. Grouped together so all the right angles align with the straight frames and forming a kind of oval, the photos create a stark contrast with the wall, drawing anyone’s eyes to them. Some are from her family, growing up in the south, but some of them are reprints from Omi and Opa’s albums. All their children dressed up in Halloween costumes. The three oldest girls out on the lawn with Opa, and the sunlight is bright, even in gray tones. Aunt Marilyn caught me looking once. When she saw me examining Opa’s grin in the sunlight with his three girls, she grinned and bumped my shoulder. “He looks like Ronald Reagan, doesn’t he?”

He did, back in Nebraska with his first three girls. Dark hair swept back from his face, though the wind tousled it, and laugh lines framing his smile, he did look a little like Reagan. I think, in my own biased thoughts, that he aged better than the president, though. More laugh lines crease from his eyes down to his chin, thick glasses guard his eyes, and white and silver spreads over his scalp now. His back is slightly hunched as he taps his cane on the floor, but he still smiles, grins, and laughs the same as he did in that picture. With quiet pride, perhaps. Pride in himself and his family.

His hands, though, are the same. A little thinner, a little more leathery, but the same. A band of pale skin wraps around his left wrist, a center on the back of it. A web of dark skin stretches from the wrist and weaves around his fingers. His right hand mirrors it. His hands are smooth, hairless, and I cannot tell what is scar tissue and what is not, even as I hold them to lean over to kiss his cheek. This, I know, is from the crash.

When he tells me of the orchard he planted around his house before he joined the air force, he says, “I had nothing better at the time, you know. Just my hands.” I do not have to imagine his palms gently rubbing together, a comforting gesture.
Because he almost lost them in the crash and again after the crash.

All through dinner, I glance at Opa’s hands, spreading butter over a piece of bread.

What all have those hands done? What has he done with them? Even though he was just talking about digging for the orchard, “Just my hands” rings through my mind as more than simply digging. It feels like “I had nothing better at the time,” means more than there was nothing better within reach for him to use. Somewhere along the line, I begin to think that there could never be anything better than his hands to work with; they were the best possible and most reliable tools he could ever have.

During a family gathering at my parents’ house, Opa and I sit in the living room, him in a plush ottoman, and me at the piano bench, and he tells me that I could and can do anything. “I have been many things in my life. Fisher, farmer, gunner, farmer again, and finally, plumber!” He grins at the last word, winking at me a little bit. “Always good work, as a plumber.” But then he points at me and the piano. “You have so many talents. You can do anything.” And he weaves his fingers together again, rubbing a thumb over his wedding ring and the skin around it. He does not have to tell me about how he could not have been any of that without his hands.

Hands he almost lost in the crash and the aftermath.

I stare down at the book of notes I have for the years leading up to World War II, not sure whether to feel sick or impressed. Not many men could build up a country to mass homicide and destruction.

Germany had been growing stronger for several years, though the first years after the Treaty of Versailles left the country and its people destitute. Vast inflation left German currency almost useless. With no military defense, no job opportunities, a shortage in almost everything,
and a several-billion dollar price tag for the last war hanging over everything, desperation was laced through the whole country. It was in these conditions that Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist German Workers’ Party rose into power.

Hitler led a convincing stage, driven by his experiences before and during World War I, which taught him racism, anti-Semitism, authority, and ruthlessness. He preached his Jewish-Bolshevik leading the Weimar Republic conspiracy until he became the leader of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party, the Nazi Party.

After his failed attempt to take over the government in 1923, Hitler received a nine-month stay in prison thanks to a sympathetic judge, who should have given him to a much longer sentence. During that time, he wrote *Mein Kampf*, which put his entire worldview and plans for the future out for anyone to see. Many times during my elementary history classes, my classmates asked why no one did anything about him then. One brash boy even said that it would have been better to put a bullet in his brain before he did anything worse.

Thinking on it… I tap my pen to my lip. I can see why he was left alone. He was an artist prone to daydreams and ranting, and no one thought he could get anywhere near as far as he did. After all, he had already failed once before. It was unlikely he could get further than a few supporters.

They could not know that he would strengthen his power and position at the head of the Nazi Party upon his release, working to inspire loyalty among the people around him. Perhaps his most dangerous weapon was his ability to give his followers a sense of purpose, a mission or goal to strive toward. His stance on anti-Semitism had a functional purpose beyond his own personal dislike—it was a force for unifying and mobilizing the nation.
And he was able to turn the growing desperation of the Great Depression among German population around into a drive toward something, anything better than what they had. Now that they were more willing to listen to Hitler’s radical views, he painted a very appealing picture of a real future, a return to the power and glory Germany had before.

Support and membership for the Nazi Party multiplied more than seven times between 1929 and 1930, and Hitler was maneuvered into the office of chancellor in 1933.

Once behind the desk, he broke the democracy, setting himself up as the benevolent dictator of the torn people. Hitler quickly started heavy Nazi propaganda to brainwash the next generation into following his every word. He wanted to control the individuals’ thoughts and feelings, not just their actions. As despicable as it is, it was effective.

One German soldier on the Russian front wrote in his journal:

In 1933, when Hitler took power, I was 11 years old. In the Ruhrgebiet where I lived there was abject poverty. I went to school with a small piece of bread, my father was out of work, everyone was out of work, it was a time of great poverty…. I got my first shoes from Adolf Hitler. All of a sudden my father was given work, the neighbors got work…. So of course we all supported Hitler. He had rescued us from a terrible situation.²

Through provisions of work and support for the German people, Hitler won their hearts, and it seemed only natural for them to march to his command. He worked to idealize himself in their minds, the white-knight-turned-king, and set about using propaganda to paint himself as

² I took this quote from Marvin Perry’s World War II in Europe: A Concise History, where he uses the quote to show the other side of Hitler. For all the horrors he condoned and committed, he did save Germany from even deeper destitution.
such. He promised a return of the power and passion of their country, beginning with the repudiation of the Treat of Versailles that took so much away from them.

The Germans regained their confidence and self-worth after years of a downward spiral, and it meant so much, felt so much better, that they were willing to ignore the growing lack of political freedom and the rise of persecution of Romani and Jews. As long as Hitler continued to put them back together, repair the damage from their loss in World War I, his people were willing to overlook many things.

Hitler began rebuilding the German military, destroying the agreements set out in that most wretched Treaty, once his place as Fuhrer was established. With a compulsory military conscription in 1935, the Kriegsmarine, the new navy, the Panzerwaffe, the full-armored division, and the Luftwaffe, an air force, all grew and began conquering. Within four years, Germany was reoccupying Rhineland, annexing Austria and Czechoslovakia.

Poland was next on the list, it seemed, but they did not give up and give in so easily. They were building up their own forces to confront the large base of power Hitler created for Germany.

When Poland did not fall under the threat, Hitler announced the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939.

Proclamation by Adolf Hitler, Chancellor of the Reich, to the German Army

The Polish State has refused the peaceful settlement of relations which I desired, and has appealed to arms. Germans in Poland are persecuted with bloody terror and driven from their houses. A series of violations of the frontier, intolerable to a great Power, prove that Poland is no longer willing to respect the frontier of the Reich.
In order to put an end to this lunacy, I have no other choice than to meet force with force from now on. The German Army will fight the battle for the honour and the vital rights of reborn Germany with hard determination. I expect that every soldier, mindful of the great traditions of eternal German soldiery, will ever remain conscious that he is a representative of the National-Socialist Greater Germany. Long live our people and our Reich!

Opa sits very still when he talks about the crash. He smiles a little when we talk about his family, seeing them and his girlfriend—five years older, he laughs—back in Wazeliszki the last time, but as we get closer to the crash, his movements slow and eventually stop. He does not push his recliner back to sway up and down, and he does not bounce one foot over his other leg. He stares up at the ceiling, and I again wonder if he is seeing something I cannot.

“We couldn’t go home for Easter, that spring. There was already trouble in—Lithuania, so we had to stay there. Preparing for the war, a little bit.” His head bobs in just the slightest bit of a nod. “Had to stay there.” There was too much chance that, while he was a four-hour train ride away, something could happen.

They were flying new planes, which made them relearn a few things, and Czeslaw got to know his crewmates fairly well. Cadet Observer, Stadnicki Jan. Cadet Pilot, Gorecki Waclaw. LAC. W.Op/A.G., Kublicki Wladyslaw. Despite the camaraderie and the new plane, a German anti-aircraft defense hit them while flying over German tanks on September 4, 1939, only three days into the invasion.

As Opa talks, my mind focuses on the crash.

What had that been like? An explosion from one engine to send them out of control. Could he grab anything but the gun controls as they fell? Was Czeslaw protected on the back of
the plane, in the gunner’s seat while the rest of it caught fire and roared furiously above him? Like lying above a bonfire, maybe? It must have warmed his sides so painfully, until Waclaw was able to send them crashing through young trees, the softest place around to land.

Trees must have sprung up everywhere around him, his stomach lifting into his stomach from the sensation of falling, falling with nothing to stop them until the trees.

Then everything was on fire. He cried out as the flames leapt around him, licking at his face and biting in and through his hands. His leather jacket, a necessity to drive out the summer chill around the Baltic Sea, protected his back, over his yellow nylon shirt. Digging his way through the fire and away from the plane, until he collapsed several feet away, cradling both arms to his chest and shielding his face from the hot breeze. The fires ate through the metal, and he wondered, as if from a distance, if they would reach the bombs in the plane’s belly. German shouting drew his attention, though, and he, Wladyslaw and Jan had to run. Waclaw, thrown into the bushes by the impact, did not get up in time, and the soldiers found him.

Czeslaw’s watch, snug around his left wrist, burned as the metal cooled. A gift or award for good shooting, that watch, and it left a pale shadow for the rest of his life.

Opa sits quietly for a few moments, and I do not know what to say.

A few years ago, I was in the passenger seat while one of my best friends drove down the highway. On a flyover exit, she began drifting into the right lane. When she realized it, she jerked the wheel to the left, overcompensating with unfamiliar power steering.

Those next few seconds are a complete blur except for one. Over the concrete barrier, I could see the three lanes of traffic heading west below us, and I grabbed at the ceiling of the SUV. We’re going to fall. We’re going to die. We’re going to land on top of someone and they’re going to die, too.
Fortunately, my friend jerked the steering wheel back to the right, and only the left headlight, then the left taillight hit the concrete. We went across both lanes of traffic toward the right barrier, and I could see the grass and summer wild flowers over it. For a moment, I thought that would not be so bad—no one else would get hurt.

But she pulled away into the curb, so only the headlight hit this barrier. Slowing to a stop, I grabbed for her shoulder, reassuring us both that we were alive.

Then I felt the burn and hissed, trying to pull my neck away from where the seatbelt dug into my skin. A chain necklace bit into me, leaving specks of blood spreading to my fingers like tulips. Beside me, Jules repeated her new mantra. “We’re alright. It’s okay we’re alright.” But when I pulled my hand away from my neck with a reluctant whimper, she began sobbing. “I’m so sorry…”

Thinking back on how I shoved the pain aside to take care of her, convince her that “No, I’m fine, you didn’t hurt me, not on purpose,” I cannot help but wonder what Czeslaw did in the aftermath of the crash. How long did he let himself sit, overwhelmed by the pain, before he pulled himself up, bandaged his hands the best he could with strips of torn uniforms, and set out to find help for them.

I wonder, *Did he think, “We’re going to die,” too?*

The journey to the hospital was not an easy one. Armed with a 9mm and all the ammunition Jan and Wladyslaw could find, Czeslaw set out to find help. It was Jan’s gun because, Opa said with a cheeky laugh, “He did not know what he was doing. Not with a gun.” He was not sure what kind of help he would be able to find as close to the German army lines as they were. The closest village was occupied by Germany, and he hesitated.
His arms were blistering, and his hands were so much worse. The bandages had to changed and readjusted and moistened often to keep from sticking to what I can only assume were second degree burns. Czeslaw changed into civil clothes, the smaller gun, and went into town. “It was about 2 o’clock, I think, when I went in, you know, to look for help, but there was nobody there.” Opa rocks his recliner a little bit. “Nobody there.”

This is the part of his story that I know he wants to talk about most, but it is also one of the harder parts to listen to. So I sit, make sure the recorder is running properly, and let Opa talk.

He asked anyone on his travels for oil to keep his skin from drying out and scarring. Everyone he passed beside the water. “It was—following the creek there,” Opa closed his eyes to remember a little more. “With the—elder trees, you know, on both sides.”

I cannot stop a quick smile. Elder trees, I know from a deep interest in mythology and folklore, is a protective wood, so to speak—supposed to ward off evil influence. It is amusing to think that Czeslaw’s luck and good health came from more than just himself.

He keeps talking, his accent creating a rhythm, smoother than a lot of the other stories he has told me, and I am lulled into my mind again. The words work with my imagination again.

Cool air chilled his skin, made the burns on his hands more painful and stung his cheeks. Czeslaw avoided looking at the raw skin wrapping around his forearms, revealed by the rolled up sleeves of his jacket, ignored the stab of pain every leaf that he brushed past caused, and kept walking.

The sun hiked through the leaves, and Czeslaw swallowed around his dry tongue. If he could focus on the steps in front of him, he could ignore the discomfort aching through—all of
him, really. Who would have thought that falling from the sky into a forest could give him many sores?

Then, he heard water.

Czeslaw could have laughed in relief at the sight of the evening sun glistening off the creek’s surface. It looked so clear, and he knelt beside the edge. The bandages soaked instantly, the cold liquid soothed the burn a little, and he sighed in relief. Readjusting his bandages, he attempted to keep the skin from sticking to the strips of cloth. With stiff movements, he cupped his hands, brought them to his lips.

The water felt wonderful on its way down his throat, but his stomach snarled against the water. With a grimace, Czeslaw looked around for anything growing nearby, anything he could eat and keep his metabolism satisfied for a little while longer.

A grin sprouted across his face when the sunlight glistened off something smooth and black. Blackberries hung a few feet away, dark and heavy and so deliciously juicy. Czeslaw carefully picked some, delicately keep the skin from bursting, and ate a handful. He savored them with the memory of Mama and a treat she brought home for the five of her children when he was younger, and the exhaustion he had pushed back all day caught up with him.

He wanted to get up, to move on. He wanted to follow the creek toward anywhere with people that would help them, but his legs trembled. With an uncooperative body, too tired to move, Czeslaw slumped to the ground right there among the berries, and fell asleep.

And he slept until he heard the voices: harsh German murmurs.

“They managed to salvage some of the weapons from the wreckage,” one German said to his companion.
The companion snorted, and Czeslaw held his breath, did not dare move. “They pulled a few prisoners, too. Most of the others will probably die soon without treatment.”

The words sent a thrill of fear through him, and Czeslaw prayed for Waclaw, for Jan and Wladyslaw. He would find help for them, and Waclaw would be all right. He might not have made it back to them, but he would be all right. They all would.

Czeslaw opened his eyes. Above him, the sun shone through dark wisps of cloud—no, that was smoke. He closed his eyes again, and his breath came in jolts. He would have to—to what? Speak to them? One wrong move and they would kill him. But if they found him hiding in the bushes, they would also kill him.

Slipping his gun and the magazine from his pocket, Czeslaw hid them in the underbrush, and sat up. Some twenty or so feet away, the soldiers reached for their weapons when they saw him, but did not shoot.

As calmly as he could, Czeslaw stood and approached them. They were soldiers, German soldiers, the same kind who shot down his plane, but he could not show that, not now. “Hello.” His voice was strong around his trembling muscles, and the soldiers relaxed at his smooth German. “Do you have something for burns? Oil? My face…” He gestured vaguely toward his burnt cheeks with one hand.

One soldier looked him over and shook his head. “I’m afraid not, friend. We were just getting our horses to return to our company.” His companion nodded, wrinkling his nose a little at the smell of burned flesh that Czeslaw had not been able to get rid of.

He thanked them anyway and turned back to gather some more berries and surreptitiously pocketed his gun and magazine. By the time he started following the creek, the soldiers were gone, and he could breathe again.
Czeslaw walked for a week, sticking by the water to keep his bandages cool and wet, before finally reaching a farmhouse. The building sat between the barn and the fields, clean of all the turmoil beyond its fences. His stomach howled for something solid and substantial, his hands ached, and he prayed that these civilians were willing to help him.

An old man met him at the door. He must have been close to seventy years old with white hair combed to one side. He put a hand in his suit pocket, took one look at Czeslaw, and ushered him into the house. It was comfortable and warm, and Czeslaw felt the exhaustion he had been keeping at bay by the bare minimum rearing over him as he sunk into a chair at the kitchen table.

Once he was settled, the old man grabbed a bowl of water, some oil, fresh cloth, and began changing the bandages on his hands, frowning at the molting skin. “Are you alone?”

“My two friends—” Czeslaw cut himself off with a wince. His throat hurt again, and his hands burned. His fingers twitched without any direction from him, and the old man slowed his movements, gentling them.

Dabbing some oil on his hands, the old man nodded. “Take it easy. We will go get them and get you boys to the hospital, hm?” Czeslaw could only nod as he watched linen blanket his hands again. “My daughter will be coming home soon, and we can see where your friends have gotten to.”

Relief was a welcome feeling, and it lulled Czeslaw into tentative sleep with the old man’s voice.
September 12th. Over a week after they crashed, and the crew finally got the medical attention they needed. The hospital was run by nuns, and Czeslaw felt the comfortable familiarity of the church around him—the solid stone and constant soft murmuring. He made sure Jan and Wladyslaw were swept into other rooms and checked over, before allowing the same to be done to himself.

The doctor who examined his hands, an older man with a few hairs sticking out his ears, began rattling off chances and percentages, and amputation. Czeslaw jerked back. “No.”

“The burns are extensive and are going to get infected. It would be safer to—” the doctor scowled at him when Czeslaw pulled his hands closer to his body.

“No. You can’t cut them off.” He could remember all the times when his hands were all he had—he planted the orchard with his hands, fished with his father, his brothers—he needed them.

“You run the risk of losing—” but Czeslaw’s face remained firm, and the doctor sighed. “Very well, then. There isn’t much I can do for you.” He passed the bandages to the nun beside him and walked away.

“Tsk.” The woman shook her head, smiled at Czeslaw. “Don’t you worry now. Wait here, I’ll be back to get you.”

She left the room in a whirl of black robes and skirt, and Czeslaw stared at his hands. Without the bandages, he could see the swollen, bubbling mess of red and pink and sticky skin trying to scab over. His fingers shook, and he could see the band of healthier skin around his wrist where his watch had been. A gift for “fine shooting.” He had never imagined that it would serve him some other way, but the circle of soft pink formed like the clock face was all he could focus on.
It seemed like no time had passed at all when the nun came back and set a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Come on.” Czeslaw looked up at her. “We’ve got a bath set up for you. It will help.”

Czeslaw followed her down the hall to a bathroom. The tub was filled with steaming water, and the woman helped him settle in. He hissed as the hot liquid covered his arms, and the pain flared to new heights.

Once the initial burn settled, however, Czeslaw could relax back against the side of the tub and just let himself float at the nun’s encouragements. The hot water rocked him in a soft tide, and Czeslaw remembered his mother again. She would not know what happened to him, if the news was correct. The war had barely started, and Wazeliskski and Podbrodzie were no longer free.

Breathing slowly, Czeslaw closed his eyes, fell into his exhaustion, and his hands began to bleed.

“..."

“When I got to the hospital, the 12th of September, there, the Sister—the Sister, the Catholics, the Sister...” Opa’s voice is calm, but coming out of the rolling lull he had before. “She look at me, you know, some guys were medic-doctor, you know, he wanted to amputate my hand! I said no, and the Sister said, come on. She put me in big tub with hot water. I go in there, and she said, ‘Don’t worry, I see this before.’ I go in there, and I fall asleep! You know, I was tired, an-and weak! And my hands, they start to bleed.”

I open my eyes to see Opa chewing his lip, something I do not think he is really aware of. My eyes are drawn to his hands again. The scars are there, but the skin is soft, smooth, and healthy. When I was younger, and held his hand for walks around the block, for trips through
the craziness that is the Polish Club Easter Egg Hunt and Picnic, I always marveled at how nice his hands felt.

The nuns did a good job, I decide with a soft smile, and I reach over to turn off the recorder again. “That’s enough for this afternoon, yeah?”

Opa blinks, turning his head as if he had forgotten what we were doing. “Oh? Oh! Yeah, yeah!” He leans forward in his recliner, prepares to stand up, and I clench my fists to keep from reaching out, helping him. He can do it himself; it’ll just take a moment. “Yeah.”

I step back and give him some more room. “I’ll just get this on my computer, okay?”

“Hm?” Big dark eyes look at me once he is upright, and Opa grins. “Yeah. Computer. You are good with that, eh?” He laughs, pointing at my Mac, and I smile. “Good with computer.” His feet shuffle as he turns toward the dining room. “I go, take a call from Poland. Yeah. My friend. We talk. Yeah.”

Watching Opa move, slowly but surely, I see his hands fiddle with his pockets, and the light from Omi’s sewing room glints off his watch.
Czeslaw Makiewicz: From Poland to America

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And it’s recording!

It’s recording?

_Uh-huh._ So...

Recorder—that’s what we saw. So now it’s recording when we’re talking, no?

_Yes._

Oh, boy. [chuckles] No, no, that’s not very good, you know?

_What do you mean?_

’ve cause it talks... you know, you know.

_Ah, it’ll pick both of us up._

Oh?

_It’ll hear both of us._

Yeah, but—but... Well...

_Well, I have questions, somewhere._

Yeah.

[rustling]

If we don’t talk, there’s nothing happening there, huh? Or recording, too?

_It’ll record whatever we do._

Recording now, even if we don’t talk, huh?

_Yes. That’s fine._

Oh well... okay.

_Um... what are the ten most important things you think you want to tell me?_
To tell you? I think that I—if you want I tell you everything, what you want.

[laughs] Well, like, in your life, what are the things you consider the ten most important?

Well, we started already, from the beginning, yeah, from my birthday, that I was poor, you know, and my family was poor, because of Russia, and that, that we already got recorded, I think.

Yeah, we did.

Yeah. Yeah, well, you wanna go farther.

Uh, we can go back to that and you can expand on it, or you can go--

Yeah, well, we can go back and erase that, yeah?

Oh, it doesn’t erase anything.

No?

Yeah, it’s still there.

Oh, okay. Well, I just talk some more, no.

Sure.

Well, then it’s—Well, my mother was working, and we were so poor that we could do nothing, and so she had to go and do some work, you know, for some other people. And later on, those eh—she was close to the river, the friends, I think. My godfather, too. And she went there to—when it was time to gather the—eh, the way, the rye, the wheat, you know. She was helping there.

Uh. Well, that was almost probably a year later, I don’t know, that—that night I don’t remember ‘cause I [chuckle] I don’t know nothing about it. When I start to remember from there, it was, ahm. Well, I remember starting when I was, I dunno, four years, maybe three years, maybe not. But that is, uh, Mother told me that she was working there for them, you know. That was about a year later because there was the Bolshevik, an-an-and was going to Warsaw, and it was 1920. See? And so, he was—one-one of them, the Bolshevik, and there was working in the fields and there that soldiers, you know, and Russian soldiers going in there, and there was storm, you know? And they said one-one of them had a, ahm... pilo, no, what is that mass saying, the pilo? The book for the mass? He had that on his saddle, for his horse, you know, his saddle, you know, and there was storm coming, you know, and thunder, know?

And he said, “‘ey, you!” They did—make a cross, you know? Yeah? When that, when the thunder near the ground, and so, he said, that—that one soldier, the officer, that people would—Kossaks, I guess. He said, ah... you—you... [laughs] You... He said, That book, eh, that book got farther than you can make the cross. See? That what I remember.
Later I remember that I got--was sexually molested by the girl. That I dunno, I dunno. That-that I was maybe three? Maybe four? I dunno. That--

*Wow.*

Yeah. And that was-that was got me--all through my life, that goin’, I was attack. And um... And seven years I went to first confession-first confession first communion, and I was--by the archbishop, and what’s you call it--confirm that I am a Catholic, right? Confirmation. Yeah, there was something. That I remember. You know, you know? I went to confession three times, and I couldn’t say what I--the priest didn’t--get me, didn’t understand me, you know, three-seven years old.

*Yeah.*

Who was that? Ahm... some woman! [laughing] There was girl probably maybe thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, I think... That’s what. Yeah, that’s... I-I knew that I did wrong, you know, I--I guess I didn’t understand yet what this was about.

*Yeah.*

Yeah, well, that’s from my--my thing. Well, that’s later on. When I was a little bit older, I went to school. I just didn’t go too school--the first school was fifth grade school.

*Okay.*

And that’s where we got little bit religion, you know? That’s--that’s--I understood the school, already, you know, where we got confession there, you know, but, we didn’t have any priest--once I think priest came there to-to instruct us, you know. He really, really asked us if we know Catholicism, you know. He didn’t really teach us nothing, you know? ‘Cause, ‘cause that was about 1926, you know, yeah. That’s when I was--You know I started school, 1926, maybe 1927, and 192-

You know I was always kinda hungry, you know. My brother was sick, always sick, and he had that pneumonia, about every second winter he had pneumonia.

*Oh, dear.*

Yeah, yeah. That’s--That on--He was going to school with me, together in same grade! He--for some reason, he was in the grade.

*How old was your brother compared to you?*

Yeah, well, he was born in 1915, and I was 1919.

*Oh, he was four years olde--oh.*

Yeah.
Oops.

Yeah. [laughing] I know-know that was--ah... Anyhow, ah... there was, I dunno. I guess that I was uh... that, uh... once I got scolded in the church because of something that--ah, the choir there was sitting there and you know. The choir there with the organ, you know.

Yeah.

You get the air there, you know, and you put the air and ah... Yeah, I was--there was some long thing I guess I--there was some girl there, you know, and I pinched her or something! [laughing] And the teacher saw it and said--and scolded me, so, well, there you are. That’s my thing.

I remember this, I was hunger-hungry. Always, you know, you know. My brother would-was-my brother he was born in 19-4, and he was working there, because that-that poor, and he was working railroad. ANd I guess they make some things, and who was stronger, and he was and--the other was stronger, and he fell and broke the arm.

Ouch.

Yeah. And then I--you know how I know because he was ready to go to the military, the compulsive military, and there is bunch of 18 years old to go to the military. And they didn’t accept him because his arm.

Oh.

Mnah. So I remember that. He came, and you know--remember he was later on-he went--I was hungry, and sometimes he would go fishing. My mother, oh, in the winter, you know, my mother left something for him to eat, and I was waiting for him to eat, you know, see if he had something for me. And he had--that’s how poor we were.

Yeah.

My mother told me that I--when they were married, they had a restaurant business, and they--was good business, but my father was gambler and drinker.

Oh.

Sometimes, they didn’t know what to do with their money, rubles, you know. Brought in thousands, you know, but when he didn’t have luck, and get drink, you know. And that, he would [laugh] gamble his clothes off!

Oh, dear!

Yeah! In winter he’d come in underwear.

Um...

So they couldn’t have that restaurant, you know, so... That’s why they, later on, they went to
Russia and because my father was on the railroad, when he was working for the railroad, too, and was... And that’s what... Uh, he-he was drinking, so that didn’t help, you know, but, later on, he-there was, there on Easter front, some gas, you know, and he go there, when the train was here or there, and he sniffed some of that, see? And that’s why he died so young. He died when I was in--when I was promoted to the third grade. So I was, maybe, eight, nine years old.

Yeah.

But, he-he-he-e, he died. I remember that because, the priest came, you know. To-to us, to the--for his--he didn’t go to church, you know, didn’t have ah... didn’t want-there. Because he said, once, they had committee, you know, and divided some the food, you know. He was in the committee, you know, and from America came some food, you know, like pork, with salt, and because there wasn’t refrigeration at time, the salt was there to keep--so, he-he sent something to church--to the-the priest, that he was the better person by the altar, but not-not here. The main thing was whom want to give it, you know. And here from that one, he didn’t go too much. But he went to confession when the priest come to confession, when ththey sent the horses. Was about two-two and a half kilometers, so... That-that, and so... uh...

The priest come... he, he-he, he died, they said... th-the same day, or maybe later, or something, you know, after confession, you know. He was sleeping, one night in August, I think, because it was warm. He couldn’t eat much. He had that eh--some, maybe cancer, you know, on his mouth. I know he-he went fishing, and I went fishing with him before that, you know, and we caught some fish, you know, and he--once, I was cough-there was some boy, you know, oh, maybe twelve, maybe fourteen years old, and he said we get who is stronger, you know. And he said, “Well! I will get down on my knees, and you will get me. He was--you will have advantage, to-to get me.” And I sprained my ring-ankle! I was--I don’t know maybe five years old, you know, maybe six. I don’t know if-if I did go to school or not yet, I don’t know yet. Probably not yet. That’s what I remember.

And then when he died, you know, he-he said--he got the rosary there, you know, and he was taken that--well, all the family, you know. My two sisters cam, an-and one was married already, sister. She was born in 1911, and she married there, you know, when, well, he... I was the last one, well. He--He must go to school, you know, to be a priest!

He died, you know.
