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Let Me Be Myself

Brandon Stettenbenz
California State University, Monterey Bay

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California State University, Monterey Bay

Let Me Be Myself

Brandon Stettenbenz

Senior Capstone

Creative Writing and Social Action

Creative Project

Professor Ernest Stromberg

Division of Humanities and Communication

Fall 2019

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Capstone Proposal

1. Provide your name and identify your area of concentration

Name: Brandon Stettenbenz

Concentration: Creative Writing and Social Action

2. Project Description:

I'm doing a creative non-fiction project, collaborating a modern day story of finding healing in Germany, and the trauma that was afflicted to a descendant of a Holocaust refugee. I'm contemplating including a poem, or quotes from musicians at the beginning of chapters. The grandma was a Jewish refugee, and her family was massacred during the holocaust in a camp in Lithuania. The focus of social action will be to raise awareness about genocide, epigenetics, and Europe's pursuit towards honoring the Jewish with memorials and museums. The project will include poetry, historical research, a short story, and photography.

3. Alignment with Common Theme:

The theme for this semester is trauma and healing. The trauma I will be focusing on is the trauma I have experienced as a descendant of a holocaust survivor. The traumatic issues focused on will be epigenetics, genocide, anxiety, and depression. The healing will feature a character's to Europe during the summer of 2018. During their travels, they were able to visit the Anne Frank House, The Memorial for the Murdered Jews, and see the stumbling stones that Germany built in front of their grandma's childhood home in Bad Orb, Germany. The story will be written in first person format.

4. Purpose:

The purpose of this project is to cultivate a story about a family that was lost to a genocide, with this story I hope to inform, enlighten, and contribute. I aspire to inform with modern day details of memorials and museums and their impact on the spirit. I hope to contribute to responsible decision making by reminding people of a genocide, and how we should rid them of humanity. I hope to enlighten people by making them more inspired to trace back their roots.

5. Format Rationale:

The format of creative non-fiction allows me to utilize my strengths as a creative writer. I have been writing blogs for over a decade, and I love writing self-help themed blogs, so this project feels very natural. The project will be told from a first person point of view. I have journal entries from my visit to Germany that will be edited and used in the project. I also have German written letters that my family sent to each other during war times, I'm hoping to get them translated.

6. Capstone Title:

Title ideas:

“Love Letters to God”

“On the Roam”

7. Working Summary:

I will integrate a holocaust refugee Grandma's story with my story, growing up with resentment and hate towards a country for murdering a family I never got to meet. A man travels to Germany at 35 years old by himself, the first time on foreign soil, to discover his family heritage. During their travels, he visited the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, The Memorial to

the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, and to the house their grandmother was born and raised in a small village town in southern Germany. In front of the house, Germany honored his family by putting stones on the sidewalk, a stone for each family member, all with their names and birth dates on them. During their travels, they stayed at hostels and met locals that could perspective of WWII, and insight on how Germany has tried to make amends.

8. Expectations:

Articulate as clearly as possible the specific expectations associated with your chosen project, including a detailed account of all deliverables. Be sure to align the project expectations with the appropriate assessment criteria and include your understanding of all documentation requirements associated with the project.

I hope to meet the expectations of the assignment by expression a simultaneous version of trauma and healing, the theme of the project. The trauma part will focus of genocide, epigenetics, and the executions of the Eisemann family. The healing part will focus on a modern day story of a non-fiction character that visits memorials in Germany, The Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe, in Berlin and The Anne Frank House, in Amsterdam. The character visits his Grandma's hometown that she escapes, to find her steppings stones.

9. Specific Skills Required:

Successfully completed writing courses at Monterey Peninsula College (MPC) in Creative Writing 2 and Poetry 1. Successfully completed Creative Writing 1, and Women's Writing Workshop at Cal State Monterey Bay (CSUMB). Currently enrolled in Life History & Creative Narratives at CSUMB. Published on multiple online publications for writing about personal stories regarding addiction, and love. Previously wrote for the school newspapers as a sports journalist and poet for MPC in 2015.

10. Next Steps:

I will have to get the letters translated from German to English. I need to do some research on the concentration camp my family was murdered. I will need to write about my own experiences in Germany and the resentment I carried, and the subconscious trauma that lived with me. I need to write as much as possible, but I love writing so this should be fun. I have already done a giant workshop with a chapter I wrote for the book this week in my writing class at CSUMB. I hope to write a chapter every weekend.

11. Timeline:

Sept 26: Project Proposal

Oct 8: Annotated Bibliography

Oct 29: First Draft

Nov 19: Second Draft with Final Annotated Bibliography

Dec 12: Final Paper + Portfolio and Synthesis Essay

Capstone Festival: Poster or Oral Presentation

End of October / Early November: Rough draft of story finished

On Cultural Transmission

I was born into this world in December, 1984, just days before the beginning of winter. I put my mother in back labor, a grueling contraction. From what she says, I was the hardest birthing of her four kids. Perhaps that's when it started.

When I was six years old, my parents drove me in their beat up Toyota van to a baseball park. I saw all these kids throwing a baseball back and forth. They signed me up for little league baseball. I was paralyzed with fear. Unable to move, I cried and cried, "Mommy, I don't want to go; I don't want to play with these strangers." I'm positive the kids could hear the loud weeping coming from the van. My parents took me home, I never got to play baseball. That was my first memory of anxiety.

When I hear the stories of generational trauma I have to wonder, is this what has caused my family such pain? Research suggests that trauma carries for generations. In *Survivor Cafe*, psychologist and neuroscientist, Yehuda, studied a group of thirty-two Holocaust survivors and their children and grandchildren. Yehuda "discovered that the children of PTSD-stricken mothers were diagnosed with PTSD three times as often as members of control groups; children of fathers or mothers with PTSD suffered three to four times as much depression and anxiety, and engaged in more substance abuse" (7).

My mom is the daughter of a Holocaust refugee, and at 65 years old, she suffers from fearful anxiety. Her sister, Aunt Simone, has taken anxiety medication for over the past fifteen years. Her brother, Uncle Drew, was found dead in 1977, at 22 years old, in an abandoned shed

in Fort Ord, California. Suicide, the cops said. I never met him. I sense this seed of PTSD is sprouted on my family tree.

Anxiety is a crippling effect: fear, paranoia, panic attacks, excessive sweating, lack of sleep, high blood pressure. From a young age it has caught me in its web of suffering. The amount of jobs I quit because I couldn't handle the anxiousness, the countless semesters I dropped out of school because I was fucking uncomfortable, working shifts at a cafe where I could hardly mutter a word, and calling in sick for mental illness days were not allowed, the nights trapped inside my head, powerless, the paranoia of worrying about what everybody thinks about me as I'm just trapped with fear and dread.

My anxiety kept descending into darker caves, the older I grew, the worse it became. Then it hit me, hard, it took me thirty years to have my first panic attack. The feeling of the walls closing in. The darkness. The fetal position, defenseless. After twenty minutes or however long it lasted, I woke out of this state of literal panic with dried salt below my eyes, and asking myself did a part of me just die? Then it happened again, and again. Everytime they happened I felt years of my life vanish, an earthquake on my future timeline.

Is the emotion mine or a vibration of anxiety Grandma Ida felt, an anxiety of genocide? Inherited from a family sent to die at Fort IX, the concentration camp in Lithuania. Perhaps this inheritance of anxiety was a mark, a lightning bolt shot into my DNA. Beyond the bark, drilled into the heart wood, jabbed to the pith, this is who I am. I accepted it. Saying it out loud, "I suffer from generational trauma."

I felt afflicted with this inherited trauma, and I recall being an anxious and unsettled boy in preschool, as I begged my mom not to go to school. Elizabeth Rosner says in her book,

Survivor Cafe, that “it’s an understatement to call entangled the relationship between memory and storytelling, trauma and healing. In the Western world, we generally believe that narratives can help us feel less alone in our grief or suffering, that finding a way to share the experience can diminish its power to damage and fester” (5). I had to find my family’s story to untangle this braid of generational pain.

On First Generation

S T A T E M E N T

Written by Ida Eisemann

I was born on 8 July 1923, daughter of Simon and Amalia Eisemann who lived at Sachsenhauserstr 10, Bad Orb, Spessart, Germany. I am the oldest of 4 girls and 2 boys whose names were as follows:

Selma 1925

Meta 1927

Hermann 1929

Robert 1932

Irma 1935

The religion of my family was Jewish. My father was in the Butcher Business, which was located on the ground floor of the address listed above. My father's business was doing very well, enough to take care of the normal business expenses and support the family.

I was going to school here in Germany, and went to 6th grade before leaving here. The wishes of my parents were that I attend the seamstress course, which I was beginning to learn in school. The course involved all kinds of needlework and handwork, also clothes designing.

All was going well with my family till the Nazi's came into power, and we were Jewish. Due to this my fathers' business was closed, and no one was allowed to buy from us.

Even though my father was a World War I veteran who had fought on the side of Germany from 1914 to 1918, he was also wounded by a bullet through the side which complicated into a lung disorder and a horrid strong cough. For this he received a decoration of the German Iron Cross, but this did not ease any hardships which were brought to him or his family. Due to the closing of the store the family just existed and near starvation.

At this time I was still in school and was in the 6th grade, when the Rabbi came to our house, explaining to my parents a

group of Jewish children were being sent to the United States and did he want to send me. This was to ship all Jewish children that could be spared because it looked like a war was coming. It was a precaution to save as many children from the cruel and horrid treatment of the Nazis' who had come into power. As I can never forget my own classmates throwing stones at me in the streets, or allowed to speak to me, because of my Jewish Faith. My parents agreed to have me sent to the United States and preparations were made as far as plans and necessary papers to enter there. By January 5, 1935, I arrived in the United States. At this time I was 11 ½ years old. Through the Jewish Organization Committee I was placed with a wealthy family to live with. They were located in Rochester, New York. I lived with this family until I was 13 ½ years old, still continuing schooling while living with them. The woman I lived with asked me if I would like to have one of my sister's brought to the United States from Germany.

My sister Selma who was the next oldest did not come, instead my sister Meta decided to. Both my sister and myself were mistreated by the woman we were living with. We told the Social Worker of the organization mentioned above and she took us to Brooklyn, New York. I was sent to live with my mothers sister

and my sister Meta was sent to live with my fathers brother. We lived a short distance from each other. By now I was going to a Sewing Trade School learning designing, sewing seamstress and all kinds of needlework, which I could not learn in Germany. I wanted to please my family in continuing with this schooling even though I had to leave Germany. My Aunt and Uncle did not let me finish the Sewing Trade School. They wanted me to work, in order to pay for the food and living with them. Clothing was furnished through the Jewish Organization and also medical care. But one of the facts was that if I started to work all this was taken away.

I worked in various factory jobs, learning all kinds of machines, in a shoe factory, dress factory and leather factory. I worked hard in the factory to pay for my expenses to my relatives or whatever else was needed. Lived with my Aunt and Uncle and their children till I was 16 years old. Finally obtained a steady position with a leather factory, where my Uncle was foreman. I learned bartacking which was done on a machine which consisted of sewing all kinds of leather loops on various leather cases and shaving kits and such. The leather business is a seasonal position and during certain times of the year slowed down. When this happened I had to look for other

work such as selling or other factory work. The Jewish Organization wanted me to be on my own.

I lived with a family, shared cooking privileges and a room rented in their house. It was a struggle supporting myself, most of my pay I made went to saving and expenses such as food, rent, dentist, doctor, and clothing bills. By now the war had started in Germany, Nazism was at its height. By 1938, my parents, brothers and sisters were forced to give up their house in Bad Orb. They were forced to move to Frankfurt/Mein, Russdorfeerstr 23 II Stek, Hinterhaus. Here they lived in one room with the 4 children and just existed from starvation. The little bit of money my father received from his pension because of his wound was the only financial aid coming in, to support the family. I tried hard to get my family to the United States by earning money babysitting besides my regular pay from working. From both these incomes I was saving as much as possible. Total war had started and my parents were sent to concentration camp somewhere in the eastern part of Germany.

Originally my family was preparing to leave for the United States in May 1942 and they had a quota number of somewhere in the 22,000ths. But in December 1941 when the world war started, the quota number was in the 21,000ths. Because of World War II

starting all that I had worked for to bring my family here was lost. All my mail sent to my parents was sent back. This was the end of correspondence between myself and the family. The results of what happened was not known till just recently. When the war had ended I tried to find out some information as to what happened to my family. Wrote to the Jewish Germeinde in Frankfurt/Mein. They wrote me of the bad news that they had fallen into the hands of Nazis' at the concentration camp, which I more or less expected, but still of course was looking for some kind of hope that maybe they escaped and were still alive. I still continued working in the leather business. Then at the age of 26 I was married, this was the year 1949. At the beginning of my marriage we were moving from place to place around the United States. In the time that I've been married I have raised a family of my own of three children.

In 1955 we were stationed in Formosa and returned to the states in 1957, during all this moving around I became out of touch with the various papers telling of the claim which could be submitted for relatives which were killed during the last war while in concentration camp or the ones that had to leave also, because of what the Nazis' had forced on them.

In September 1958 my husband was transferred to Weisbaden, Germany. After I arrived here we went to Frankfurt/Mein and visited the Jewish Germeinde to find out more about my family, was told that they were gassed in the eastern part of Germany. It was there that I was asked whether I had collected the restitution money for my parents and for myself being forced to leave. After learning of this I went to the Restitution Office here in Weisbaden and explained my case to them. After filling out some application papers was advised to obtain a lawyer to defend me. I have done this and he is presently working on my case.

Had the Nazis not risen to power and the war not started I would still be a citizen of Germany. Also had it not been that I was forced to leave when I did, myself and my sister would probably have been dead with the rest of the family. Probably would have succeeded in the profession in which I was studying while at school and contributed my services to my native country. But at least I thank God that I am presently still alive and also my sister and only sorry that because of the war lost the rest of my family by the people that were in power at that time.

On Second Generation

(2019)



Photo: Grandma Ida Eisemann, approximately 1950's in Brooklyn, NY

Just days before Thanksgiving 2019, my mother, Sherryl Stettenbenz, sat down to do an oral life history about my Grandmother, Ida Eisemann. Ida died in the mid 1980's due to a battle with cancer, but her memory still lives vividly in my families minds. Her inspiring and courageous story transcends time. Sherryl touches on my Grandmothers struggles in her early life, of losing her family to Nazi Germany, moving to America, and the impact the Holocaust still has on us in the 21st century.

Ida's daughter and my beautiful mother, Sherryl, is in her late sixties, spends most of her time with her three friendly dogs, Mickey, Minnie, and Toby. Sherryl is a retired social worker. For over twenty years she aided the Welfare Department for Monterey County of California. Her personal passion for knowledge on the history of the Holocaust has been instilled in her at a young age, and every time she watches a new documentary on the Holocaust she feels a family obligation to make sure we're reminded of it, or perhaps, to remind us of where we came from, or to remind us to fight for a world of peace.

Brandon: What is one of your fondest memories of your mother?

Sherryl: Well the thing I always brag about my mother is that she had a heart of gold, and she would give you the shirt off her back, and she was very kind.

Brandon: Nice, when you think of your mother, Ida, what image of her comes to mind?

Sherryl: Well she always liked to look young, and she tried to stay fit, and she just was very youthful, that was the image. She always seemed very youthful.

Brandon: Do you remember a story that your mother would tell you from your family, that was passed down from the family?

Sherryl: Hmm, oh I do. My mother used to, because she was Jewish and came to the States. The story I always remember is she would say that when she came to the United States, she was 11 years old, and her parents told her cause they were left in Germany, to look at the moon. And that, and that they would be looking at the moon too. Like for some kind of connection for her to still have with her parents at 11 years old. (Crying, grabs a tissue)

Brandon: Did she tell you the story of how our family came to America?

Sherryl: Yeah. Well she wrote the one letter, and they knew the war was gonna break out with the Nazis, and so the oldest child got to come to the States. So the Rabbi from the temple went to her family and said “Do you want to send your oldest child to the states, because the war was gonna break out?” So that’s how she came to the States and rich society people took her in, and took care of her. But then it wasn’t such an easy life because at 16 years old she was having to work in the factories. I know she said she made leather binders and things like that at 16. She would try to send money to her parents in Germany.

Brandon: Did she ever speak about her childhood home or family?

Sherryl: I remember she told me that when the whole Nazi thing broke out, that the friends she used to have would throw stones at her at the street, because she was Jewish. The two parents and five kids, there’s four and six, I can’t remember. So there were six kids and two parents, and they were all children. She was the oldest at eleven, and so the rest of them were all shot. They were all killed. From the baby to eleven years old. Horrible.

Brandon: When you hear the word holocaust, how does it make you feel?

Sherryl: I actually hate that word because of all the people that died because of the Holocaust. I don’t understand how, how uhh, German soldiers that were Nazis, how they treated the Jews like they weren’t even human, like they were animals. The things that they did, umm were just so cruel, and the babies. I don’t know how they had no conscious, the Nazis. It really makes me mad because I was telling my son, Shane, the other night how the Nazis are getting at an age where they’re almost dead and gone because of their age, but then Shane was saying something to me about there’s a Nazi rising in the United States of younger people and it just makes me super mad. I get really mad. It’s scary if that could ever happen again.

Brandon: How did you learn about the family members lost during that time?

Sherryl: When my mother was trying to get compensation for her family, she wrote this two-page letter about when she came here and what she thought happened to the family. She also had a sister that was able to come, so two of them were able to survive it. I read this two-page letter, and it was about two years ago I decided to go on the internet and see if I could find their names, and one of the kids names was Selma, and when I put that name in and the internet said to go to another site about Nazis. So I just started researching it, somehow I came across the whole family on the internet. There were so many German Jews they didn't know what to do with them, so they thought they'd move them. Five of the trains were sent to Fort IX in Lithuania, and those five trains unfortunately all those people were shot to death, and I saw the whole families name on the list. There's actually a memorial there for that Fort IX in Lithuania you can go see. That's how I discovered everything. So she died thinking they were gassed to death, but we found out that they were actually all shot. The story of how the five trains were diverted to Fort IX, and this was at the beginning of the war. In fact, the whole family had a number to come to the States and my mother would send them money, I guess while they were in the ghettos. Who knows if they ever got the money. The year they were shot, I guess a year later their numbers came up. I was also confused on her sending the money and if they would even get it in Frankfurt. She was sixteen then working and sending the money, and they did have a number. I don't know if it is in the letter that I gave you? That their number was supposed to come up to come to the United States.

At first the United States didn't want to have anything to do with this. Saving anybody that were Jews. They were all just hearsay stories, they had to really fight, and that's how they let some of these children come. They were refugees actually, Jewish refugee children.

Brandon: There's a science behind generational trauma, when we inherit certain things from our ancestors. Do you think it's possible for yourself or me to inherit the trauma of the Holocaust?

Sherryl: I think so because knowing how your family was killed is really traumatic. It's just such, the Nazis were so cruel. It changes your life when you find that out about your history. I think it changes your life, because even you've become interested in. To me it's intriguing, but I just don't know how they could be so cruel. It always struck me odd how Hitler came to power with all these people, like a cult, and brainwashed them that Jews were bad and that he wanted to build a white superior race. How they got away with killing millions of people, and they thought they were gonna hide it by burning them in the oven. Millions of people and the clothing and the shoes and the glasses, I mean it's just insanity how you think you can get away with it. It bothers me more that the Nazi officers, that were in some of those camps, somehow they made it to America and lied about where they were from, and lived twenty, forty, fifty, years after they had killed all these people, and they lived in the States, kinda in hiding, they weren't checked out good enough after what they did to all these people. Cause you know it wasn't just Jews too, it was Gypsies, and they first started out killing disabled people; people they felt that wouldn't have any value in society, that's how he first started killing. Then he came up with this white race he wanted to have.

Brandon: Was it weird for her to be back in Germany after the war was over?

Sherryl: Yeah, it was really hard. She wanted to go because she wanted to find out what happened to her family, because of course they didn't have internet back then. She went to the consulate there, and she had to go through all kinds of hoops, she had to write that story to try to get some compensation but it was a lot to deal with. The one thing my mom was German, but she said after the war that she still had German friends that she met in the States, but the one thing she told me was that deep down inside she really hated the Germans. She never forgave them, which I could never forgive them. Deep down inside she said she hated the Germans.

Brandon: I could imagine, I mean they wiped out her whole family.

Sherryl: Except for the one sister Meta, because she was able to bring another sister to the States. She lived with rich society people, but they were also abusing Meta. Then my mother had to go to some kind of social services to try to get her taken to a better home, and that's why I didn't understand, you come to these homes, these people take you as a refugee child and they abuse you. What is the point of that? So she got her away from that, and I guess they lived with an Uncle or something.

Brandon: Were they close?

Sherryl: They were close. They were close the whole time. My mom always kept in touch. She went to always visit, and Aunt May, I called her Aunt May, she lived in North Dakota, she had two daughters. She ended up dying at a young age of thirty-six, because she didn't have medical insurance back then. She had a small hernia or cyst in her uterus, and couldn't get it operated on because she didn't have the money and it turned into cancer. So she died at thirty-six years old, pretty young. After making it to the States from the war, isn't that something? You die that young.

Brandon: You guys all went back to Ida's hometown village, Bad Orb, Germany. What was that experience like?

Sherryl: Yeah in 1982. Since I had always watched all the stuff on Nazis and the Germans and the war, I really wanted to go back to her hometown. She lived and was born in a town called Bad Orb, and they're known for their hot springs. Her family had a house where there was a butcher store on the bottom, and I don't know if they lived on the top, and the house was still there and in 1982 there were still people alive that knew her. We knocked on the door. In fact, in that house my mom said she was born in, and the lady let us go in the house, and she was able to show us the room, it was really interesting. Then whoever took us around, they took us to their house and they told us the story of how they would sneak them food, and sneak them the radio, and how they were trying to help her family at the beginning when the war was breaking out. Then the Nazis took their house, and they were sent to the ghettos in Frankfurt until they were put on that train to Fort IX. I don't know how long they were in the ghettos. For a while.

Brandon: Was it hard for your mom to go back to Bad Orb?

Sherryl: I'm not sure, I think it was, but I remember the people telling her stories about how they were helping her family. Of course now there wouldn't be any of the people left because of the ages. But umm, so that was really a good piece of history, and that's why I was glad when you went back and saw it. Except now they put the Stolpersteine there which is really neat.

Brandon: Do you feel any trauma from it?

Sherryl: Trauma? I don't think I do. I just get angry or sad. I just hate that this went on and on and on, when I watch documentaries on the different concentration camps. The things that happened were just horrible, and to the children, disgusting. People didn't even know when they

were put on the trains, and then they were squished, a hundred people on a train, they had no bathrooms nothing. Then they went to these camps, they decided men on one side and women on the other, and they would be walking to go get gassed. They had no idea. Whole towns were wiped out. Even after the war they couldn't go back to the town, because somebody else was living in their house and the Germans still hated the Jews. They were mean to them in some of these towns. There was one story where the woman said, "what are you doing back here? I thought they killed you all," and the woman ended up leaving her hometown because there was nothing left for her. They had no food, no money, nothing, coming out of these camps. Even after these camps were liberated the people were still sick, hundreds of thousands still died because they were just too far gone. I just don't know how it went on so long without our country intervening sooner. Who would think that you could kill millions for their religion? That's what blows me away.

Brandon: If your mom was alive today, what would you say to her or like to say to her?

Sherryl: Oh, I don't know because I think about her all the time. It would be neat if my mom was alive, because she would've got to see all you guys born. She would've got to see where we live. She was so kind, and umm, she was just a really good person. My mom had a lot of suffering. (starts crying and pauses) But she still was a good person..... you know if you come out of something that bad, and you're still a kind and generous person it says a lot about that person ...I wish you could've known her longer, but you were so little when she passed away. I always think the good people pass away. I didn't mean to make you cry.

Brandon: (crying) Oh, it's fine.

Sherryl: I think that that's the thing that I admire the most about her, she had such a hard rough life since eleven. Then she met my dad who was kind've abusive, and she was such a neat person. She was such a kind person. It's funny cause people always say that about me, I think that's because my mom brought me up. She had to have taught me kindness like that. Cause you know when I worked for the welfare department I have letters this thick and everybody said "you're so kind, you're so kind," and I think that's instilled from my mother.

The only other thing, it's a trivial thing. When my mom was dying at the hospital and my sister has the big eyes and I always have the small eyes like my mom, and I always hated my eyes, I wanted the big round eyes. Then the rabbi came in and said, "You look just like your mom you have her eyes," and from that moment I always loved my eyes. Isn't that crazy? But him saying that, "You have your mother's eyes," and I was like oh my God, I have something to remember her by. After my mom passed away, some of her friends that I ran into said "oh you have your mom's eyes." So that was something I really treasured after that, I was pretty young when that happened. But yeah I wish you could've gotten to know her longer. She was a pretty neat person.

Brandon: What are your hopes that you would like to pass on to your children?

Sherryl: I think the biggest hope is to treat people right, and if they have kids to pass on what happened to my mother. That's what I would want, for them to teach them what happened to them, to never forget. I don't know if future generations would be as interested as I was from it.

On Discovery

Okay, so one day I wake up, I'm 12 years old, playing video games, watching pro wrestling, and ask my mom about my grandma Ida, who passed away when I was just a toddler. Then I ask her about my grandma's family, her brothers, sisters, mom and dad, and she responds with,

“Well they were all killed in the Holocaust.”

“Mom what's the Holocaust?”

“Well it was against the Jews. Hitler, he killed all the Jews, in Germany, during World War II.”

“Wow mom, that's really terrible. So are you saying I can't meet her family?”

“No, they're all dead.”

Then I go to middle school and I read *The Diary of Anne Frank*, but my youth prevents me from understanding the magnitude of her story. Then there's World War II movies like *Schindler's List*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Dunkirk*, countless others, and I sit in the theater, and the numbness grows inside because I will always imagine my family I never met.

I watch these films, I read Anne's story, and slowly I begin to hate part of the world. I hate a country. A virus grows inside me, resentment, anger, and hate. A small daily dose of resentment. I hold on to this virus for 34 years. Unbeknownst to myself living with this hate almost destroyed me.

Twenty Years Later

I'm at my mother's house, sitting in that same very bedroom that used to be the one I grew up in, but now I'm an adult. I've moved out of the nest, and the room has been converted to an office. I'm sitting in the office filled with childhood memories, chatting with my mother, and unexpectedly, my phone rings.

"Hello?"

"Hi, this is Chaim Motzen. I'm a journalist and historian. I'm calling from Israel. Am I speaking to Brandon?"

"Hi, yes this is Brandon. Hi Chaim. What's going on?"

"I understand that your family, the Eisemann's were lost during the Holocaust. Is that correct?"

"Yeah, it's really a terrible tragedy that happened; it pains me to think about it."

"This call is about your Grandmother Ida. We have located a pendant in Sobibor, Poland. It belonged to your Grandmother's cousin, Karoline Cohn. The reason I called you today is to tell you that this pendant is really special."

"This is really incredible news, I don't know what to say."

"We discovered that this pendant is almost identical to the one Anne Frank wore. We believe that Karoline and Anne used to be friends, and they went to the same school together in Germany."

I was in shock. My head racing. Is this really happening to me?

"Are you serious?"

“Yes, there are some published works on this story online, if you send me your email I can send you a link to it.”

“Of course, I’ll send it over right away.”

“Thank you Brandon, I’m eager to hear what you think of it. I have been doing a lot of research on your family, the Eisemann’s. Another reason I called is because your family (pauses)...Well Germany has put Stolpersteine in front of their home in Bad Orb.

“What is a Stolperstein?” I asked.

“They are stones put throughout Europe to honor and remember Holocaust victims. Although your Grandmother moved to America, they have put a stone for her.”

“This really warms my heart, and is an incredible phone call. I don’t know what to say. Thank you so much for all this information. I will send you my email and please let’s keep in touch.”

I knew then what I had to do. I had to go to Germany. I couldn’t believe the fact that my family was receiving some recognition. Their own memorial. Part of the world was healing my hate. I did not know how I was going to get there but I knew that it had to happen. This visit was a necessity for myself and my family in the U.S.

I eagerly waited for the email from Chaim. He sent me a list of articles written on the topic. Dan Bilefsky from *The New York Times* wrote:

Sometime in September 1943, Karoline Cohn undressed and waited for her hair to be shaved at a hut at Sobibor, the Nazi extermination camp, in eastern Poland. Then, as Karoline, 14, walked the final steps to the gas chambers, most likely unaware that she was about to be killed, she dropped a pendant engraved with the words “good luck” in

Hebrew through the wooden floorboards. That, at least, is a leading theory to explain the pendant, which was discovered more than 70 years later by archaeologists at the site of the extermination camp, one of the most brutal in Hitler's killing apparatus.

As I continued to research further, *Time Magazine* published a similar article with a headline reading, "A Young Holocaust Victim Left Behind a Clue That Would Reunite Her Family Decades Later." This spiritual reunion was starting to surface, a reunion amongst myself and my lost ancestors, and a reunion of Karoline and Anne's spirits. It was suggested that Anne and Karoline were friends, at the very least classmates. Sadly we can only speculate. Olivia B. Waxman says,

experts wonder whether Karoline was somehow connected to Anne Frank, who was likewise born in Frankfurt and is known to have worn an almost identical pendant — a fact that inspired interest in the pendant from the beginning. And a class photo from 1936 that possibly includes Karoline has facilitated communication between people from different schools in that period, which can be used to help identify other people who were the same age and shared the same fate.

Before Chaim, most of the information of my family was very limited. All we knew or presumed was that they were murdered during the Holocaust. We assumed in Poland, but as we later discovered it was in Lithuania at Camp IX, and most likely they died by gun execution. Being the third generation, I felt afflicted with this inherited trauma.

As the months went by, I could not help but feel pulled to visit Europe. Except I didn't have the finances. During that same time, my last remaining grandparent passed away, my grandmother Madelina. She lived a beautiful life, and passed at 91 years old. My brothers and I

were blessed that she gifted us some money to use for our future. I promised myself I would use this gift to visit Germany. In a moment of stress, I quit my job, and, feeling very isolated, I purchased a ticket to Paris.

I called my mom and told her, “Mom, I’m going to Europe. I’m gonna find a way to get to Germany and visit Grandma’s house and see the stones.” In that moment, that was all I knew about my future, I had a purpose, and it was time to visit a part of the world that I avoided my whole life, Germany.

On History

After a week in Paris, and getting adjusted to my first time in a foreign country. I slowly found myself in Amsterdam I was expecting to party, since Amsterdam was the place of legal weed, mushrooms and the infamous Red Light District. As much as I wanted to let go, there was something digging deeper inside me. I felt compelled to visit Anne Frank's house and connect Karoline Kohn's spirit. Walking through such an iconic reminder of trauma was an emotional experience. Hours later I felt my body changing, I was shedding dead skin that was on me since birth.

A Flight from the Golden Gate

To the Eiffel Tower

Train to the "Jerusalem of the West"

Amsterdam

I didn't think I'd ever be here.

I read your Diary in middle school.

Surreal for a young boy

How could I grasp a story of such

Holocaust

Except you stuck with me

For years and years

Your story felt like part of my story

My mom shows so much passion

When she hears your name

Anne Frank

You were a voice for the Jewish,

For the Eisemanns executed at Camp IX.

A reminder, a symbol

At your doorstep

An ascent of survival

With hundreds of people

We all read your Diary

Waited in the hot lines, nobody complained.

Groups of students on field trips, families, and

This lonesome anxious traveler

I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for

The call from the Israeli Journalist

He said they found my ancestors pendant

The relic you two shared.

Caroline Kohn, your friend from school

It was found in Poland
Under the wooden floorboards
Her involuntary resting place
A death camp
250,000 Jews murdered there
Hidden graves from Nazi asphalt
Not forgotten

An excavation.
Rekindled your spirits
Reunited family

So here I am
Step on up
10 Euros to visit
This haunted house
These weeping windows
Your hiding place
The fake bookshelf
Those old rickety steps.
How much focus you must've had on them
Every sound magnified

Even today, with the melancholy guests

Only footsteps were heard

Your window view is now a massive synergistic tourist city

Wine and Cheese canal tours

A party

Red Lights, Alcohol, Mushrooms

Plumes of burning cannabis

Amnesia

How could a genocidal maniac ever get here?

Nobody forced to wear the yellow star.

No curfews, bicycles aplenty.

The dark alleys are empty.

Your dwellings are a reminder

The end of the tour, a quiet cafe

Discomfort food

Tear filled Eyes

I wrote my mom a postcard

With your picture on it

Smiling in front of a typewriter

“Let Me Be Myself”

On Foreign Soil

After I left Amsterdam, I was on a six hour train to Berlin. Berlin was not on my list of places to visit, but my brother told me it's an amazing city, so I skipped London and headed east to Germany. Subconsciously I might have always been avoiding Germany. Although I planned to visit the Stolpersteine in Bad Orb, resentment was branded on me. I traveled on a very long six hour train ride, sitting in the cargo area because I couldn't figure out the assigned seating, it became a very quiet moment full of reflection and discovery. To my surprise, Germany was full of nature, mountainsides, forests and lush greenery. Graffiti was common at every train stop. Embracing street art was not something I was used to in California.

There I was, at the train station in Berlin, I could feel this new sense of purpose in my life. I was actually able to see my roots. I could see my genetic code in the people walking around. I yearned to speak German, and all the locals assumed I was German based on my physique, which I politely said, "I'm sorry, I don't speak German."

I didn't have an itinerary in Germany, but once again I was compelled to go to the Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe. The monument erected hundreds of concrete pillars to resemble the fallen Jews. Below the ground there was a museum. Naive of this upcoming experience, I walked down the steps.

In the museum there were numerous testimonies of Jewish oppression and personal stories, some written in stone on the ground. Most of the rooms were very dark, and the only light illuminating the rooms were the words on the ground or the old photos on the walls. Some of the quotes were heart breaking, reading about people being taken from their families, put into

trains that would be their hearse, and ultimately sent to concentration camps and gas chambers. People continuing to hold on to hope; hope that the war would be over, and they would survive.

Then I entered a large dark room. There was a historical documentary of World War II projecting on the screen, but this room was there for mourning. It was at the end of the tour, and large enough for me to hide in the shadows and weep. I sat in the room, and cried. So many emotions of my family and other families were hitting my heart, and provoking tears from my eyes.

I was uncertain why I was doing this to myself, I was on holiday in Europe, a trip I waited my whole life to do, but I was spending my time mourning my family. I don't usually go to museums, and I have always tried to block out the hate that was inflicted on my family, but here I was doing both. My own spiritual excavation.

Sleeping below the Berlin stars

First time in my homeland

Ruminating with every step

A juxtaposed American

These were my people

Lost in translation

A barrier of a broken wall

End of the Cold War

Covered in graffiti and art

Spray painted memorandums

From a liberated courier pigeon

“Mexico is the shit”

“Go Vegan Eat Pussy”

A Fraternal Kiss

In Berlin

A visit to my Ancestors

Irregular Concrete Slabs

A Museum or a Cemetary

Underneath a monument

To the Murdered Jews of Europe

Weeping in darkness

Thousands of miles from home

Agony begins to surface

Mourning from generations past

Shedding on the horrors written in stone

An alchemy of affirmation

A lexicon that I'm not alone

Genocide affects us all

Ripples for decades

A dark valley of death

From gas chambers to teardrops

A belated journey to heal

The hate that was birthed

From generation to generation

Inflammation Subsides

Family wounds proliferate

I break bread with Germans

A warm cooked meal

Campfire of Cold Ale and Cigarettes

Contemporary World War of Soccer

World Cups and Discos

A Hostel of Travelers

In Berlin

A shy confession of my story

Jewish offspring in American asylum

My body a cenotaph for all my dead relatives

They welcomed me with open arms

A travel weary heir

My calloused heart began to soften

Waking up under an apple tree

This was my home

In Berlin

On Healing

“Have you heard of every village in California?” the elder German man responded sarcastically. Every person I asked in Europe wasn’t familiar with Bad Orb, my grandmother, Ida’s hometown. The only local advice I received about the town, was if a town in Germany had the word “Bad” in it, it indicated it was a spa town, a retreat for Germans and tourists to relax. Disturbing that my Grandmother’s family was snatched from their homes, in a spa town, for being Jewish.

After visiting five countries and traveling close to 6,000 miles, I was finally on my way to visit her village. I carried with me the picture my mom gave me before I left California, taken during the 1930’s. It was a black and white photo, two men and a woman are wearing white dirty aprons. They owned and operated a butcher shop on the bottom floor, a woman is holding a child, there’s a tiny dog, and a man in a suit posing in front of the house, the house she grew up in, these people are my blood, the Eisemanns’.

This picture became my compass when I was nervous I would get lost, or feeling scared from traveling such a far distance alone, yet this feeling was not much compared to the journey my grandmother was burdened with, fleeing from the Nazis and unknowingly having lost her family. *I had to get there*, I would repeat to myself in moments of doubt.

After a drunken nights sleep in Frankfurt, I rode a train and bus, and arrived in Bad Orb. It was warm, a midsummer day, luscious green nature. I departed the bus and started to walk, disregarding my map. It felt as if I had already been there. I never felt so familiar in such a foreign place. I knew her street address. I walked passed an old lunch stand, serving Brats and

sandwiches. I passed a supermarket, a few small car dealerships selling Volkswagens, and there it was on Sachsenhäuser Str., Grandma's house. I imagine a life that I could've lived, this could've been my hometown.

Laying before me was my families stepping stones, eight of them, with their names

Hier Wohnte or Here Lived:

Simon Eisemann Born 1899 - Unfreiwillig Verzogen (Involuntary Taken)

Deported 1941 - Shot 22.11.1941 - Kaunas

Amalie Eisemann Born 1892 - Involuntary Taken -

Deported 1941 - Shot 22.11.1941 Kaunas

Ida Eisemann Born 1923 - Flucht (Flight) 1938 - USA - Überlebt (Survived)

Selma Eisemann Born 1925 - Involuntary Taken 1938 - Deported 1941

Shot 22.11.1941 Kaunas

Meta Eisemann Born 1927 - Flight 1938 - USA - Survived

Hermann Eisemann Born 1929 - Involuntary Taken 1938 - Deported 1941 -

Shot 22.11.1941 Kaunas

Robert Eisemann Born 1932 - Involuntary Taken 1938 - Deported 1941 -

Shot 22.11.1941 Kaunas

Irma Eisemann Born 1935 - Involuntary Taken 1938 - Deported 1941 -

Shot 22.11.1941 Kaunas

I collected some daisies nearby and placed them next to the stones. I had made it, all by myself, my family thousands of miles away. I was standing in silence, with so much uncertainty. I got down on my hands and knees and kissed the stones, and then I sent a prayer to my

Grandma, and to the family I never met. I sent them love from my family back home, from the living world, letting them know that everything was okay, there was peace in this part of the world, the war was over.

I sat near the stones for a while, anxiously smoking cigarettes, watching cars drive by. Who ever owned the house had kept it up: blooming flowers, green grass, shrubs, and bushes. Sadly, there was no sign of a butcher shop, it must have been converted to a living quarters years ago.

Unfortunately, I didn't speak German, regardless I knocked on the door. *Knock Knock Knock*, what should I say in my American accent? "Hi, umm, you don't know me, but umm my family used to live here, their names are actually on the uh stumbling stones in front of your house. Here's a picture of my family from the 1930's. Umm is there any chance we could have some tea or I could walk around inside?" *Knock, Knock, Knock*, nobody answered. I tried a third time, and I didn't hear any noise inside.

I stood by the stones, feeling the spirits in the air. Begging to the heavens that my family was here with me. This moment deserved to be shared with them, yet a selfish request under the context. Imagine what they were begging when they were sent to the concentration camps.

I sparked another cigarette, and decided to walk around Bad Orb, I was hungry and needed to see the village. It was high noon, and it was a hot day. This town was so quaint, and peaceful, the visions I had of it were much more different. I imagined endless mourning, but perhaps it was me who never stopped mourning.

The town was full of beautiful parks with thick Spruce and Redwood trees. I wandered through the park, the feeling of tourists seeking refuge and their spa day was eerie. *Don't they understand the evil that took place here?*, I wondered.

As I walked, I noticed a giant open barn. When I approached it had a micro climate of cool air that felt good in the heat, it was a salt mine, converted into a graduation tower. The sound of salt water gently trickling of the brine over the black thorn brushwood was similar to what being back home on the California coast felt like, "ahh home," I imagined. This Tower was built for healing, and the air was cleansing for the lungs and the skin. I walked in between the salt tower and water trickled on my black shirt and backpack, I slowly paced up and down the tower, deeply breathing in the cool air. I noticed a woman with massive wounds on her arms and legs, she looked like she was in a lot of pain, she never moved from that bench during the hour I was there. When I got out of the mine, my black clothes were covered in salt.

I walked further through the park, I felt better, and noticed troughs of salt water; so I took off my shoes and socks, raised my pants, and walked in the cold salt water, tourists looking at me awkwardly. I then walked farther into the forest, finding myself on top of a bench with a view of the harmonious forest and the village below. I sat there, wondering what could have been. What could have been in a world without evil, without genocide, without hate. I sat on the bench alone. Nobody spoke English, and I deeply missed my family. I imagined what it must have been like for my Grandma, fleeing to America, alone, and only speaking German, similarly not having anybody to talk to.

For the first time in my life, I found peace. Sitting on that bench watching the white butterflies dancing in the air. The sounds of kids playing in the community pool. Families hiking

barefoot trails. My black clothes covered in salt, healing my internal wounds. I knew then that it was time to return home.

Reflective Essay

It's been over a year since I've returned home, and I still can't believe my journey was a reality. I had dreamed of traveling the world since I was a kid and I didn't expect my first adventure to be a metamorphosis of being. Releasing trauma in a metaphysical way is hard to quantify. As the months went by after returning home, I became happier and more confident, and the anxiety I've lived with has lessened. I felt this itch that I scratched for a lifetime go away.

Yet I can't understate the virtue of visiting my roots. Although my Grandmother fled Germany in 1935, going back allowed me to travel back in time. My spirit became wiser and connected my family's timeline. I haven't fully cured myself of this inherited curse of anxiety, but I can recognize it and massage it, and those crippling panic attacks have been nonexistent since I returned. I marvel at the complexity of the human spirit.

I knew long ago that my hate for a country was unhealthy and needed to be addressed, and realized I'm not alone, in *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* by Dr. Joy DeGruy which focuses on theories of multi-generational trauma afflicted to African Americans, she mentions that the first step to healing is to be aware of what needs to be healed. Joy says, "Knowing your history is a necessary key to knowing yourself, and it is precisely for this reason that I wrote the book: to help us understand who we were as a people and how the past has influenced our present state of being and the people we have become" (211). I share this same sentiment as Dr. Joy expresses, and have felt healing in the process because we must look at the past to heal from it's pain and move forward with wisdom and strength.

While writing this story, I've found moments of healing, and pain that a project of this magnitude involves. Working on this assignment has come with many challenges including emotional stress, and personal exploration of subjects that can be depressing and unkind. Doing the oral history project with my mother about my Grandmother created a bond that brought us closer together. Transcribing my Grandmother's letter left me in tears and took me back to her life of heroism and tragedy. Traveling to Germany alone was a necessity that left me exhausted and ill. Performing the poems I wrote for the book in front of an audience of strangers at a poetry reading was a test of how my story of generational trauma would be received, which left some in the audience in tears.

This process felt as if it was my destiny more than a choice, and the value of writing and sharing it can not be underestimated. In the book, *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice*, by Charles Anderson and Marian McCurdy, they mention the correlation to my discovery of healing while working on this project:

It is change from a singular self, frozen in time by a moment of unspeakable experience, to a more fluid, more narratively able, more socially integrated self. Students seek out the writing classroom for this kind of work because the very process of writing and rewriting invites them to tell their stories, to listen to what their stories tell them, to hear and to be heard by others engaged in similar work, and it supports the healing those stories make possible (7).

Working on this project made the healing process feel more raw, sobering, and real. I made peace with the devil in my heart. I will never get my family back, but I can help share their

story, and be compassionate to others. Share the history of a time we should never go back to. This is our story.

Final Synthesis

During my participation in HCOM 475 Senior Capstone, our theme was trauma and healing, and during the semester we took a magnified look at a lot of different aspects of trauma and healing. The course was orchestrated as a seminar class, and the students would select a reading that was assigned to us by our Professor Ernest Stromberg, and we would lead class discussions based on the readings.

The seminars were very thought provoking and allowed a group of soon-to-be graduates get a chance to practice pedagogy. I lead a discussion based on the book, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* by Dr. Joy DeGruy. With my partner, Harmoni Fajewonyomi, we discussed institutionalized racism, oppression, leadership, and discovering native roots, in regards to the African American community.

We concluded our discussion by asking the group of students in attendance how they planned to be leaders for their community after graduating, which was a powerful way to get to know my peers and understand how they can put their passions in a positive way to benefit society. I was very proud of this seminar because my classmates expressed to me that they felt this was the best discussion of the semester. Harmoni and I were not friends before the project began, and I feel that leading a discussion based on such a heavy topic is a bond we will always share.

As a participant in class, I was given the opportunity to provide feedback, personal confessions, and challenge the class to think about issues from a different perspective. I was able to give personal stories about being a Holocaust descendant that were conceptual to the reading, *Cafe Survivor*, by Elizabeth Rosner. Rosner's book was focused on telling the story of Holocaust survivors and how it is still impactful in contemporary society. The book helped confirm my desire to write my creative piece on my own personal history dealing with the Holocaust.

This project could not be possible without the help and feedback I received from others. I sought out feedback and constructive criticism from my peers in HCOM 475, as well as former professors, and friends. I sought out inspiration by attending local poetry readings, and researching spoken word poets on YouTube. I worked with my mother, Sherryl Stettenbenz, on the oral history portion in which she attempted to give an account of my Grandmother, Ida's, life as a Holocaust refugee. Sherryl also aided in collecting letters and family documents that complimented the story.

Let Me Be Myself, is a collaboration of: essays, poems, oral history, research, travel narratives, and life history. The story deals with a history dating back to the 1930's and present time. Some of the writings are first person narratives that are depictions of visiting Europe during the summer of 2018 and exploring my family roots. I used poetry to try to convey powerful meaning without a lot of words. The poem, *On Foreign Soil*, featured my visit to Berlin, which highlighted the first steps I had being in my native country for the first time, a country that killed part of my family during the Holocaust. In the essay, *On Cultural Transmission*, I used an essay to explain my own experience and family history of anxiety, and how this could be a sign of epigenetics. I wrote a short story called, *On Healing*, which retraced my experience visiting my

grandma's hometown and standing in front of the house she was born in and the Stolpersteine that are put in place for my family.

The piece that I felt was my strongest was a piece I workshopped with over twenty students, *On Healing*. I read the story out loud and they all had copies of the story to make their own critiques and give feedback. I wanted to capture the theme of healing, and compare my narrative to my grandmother's of tragically escaping World War II. The piece worked well because I was able to write a story without too much over-wording, and just enough detail that the readers felt engaged and brought out their own emotions. One of the comments from a student said, "I was shaking when I read this," others referred to it as "powerful," so I felt it was an effective piece. When I work shopped, *On Healing*, I started to cry at the end of the reading, which was a very emotional experience. I had to run to the bathroom and wash my face because I couldn't stop crying. I realized in that moment how powerful it can be to share writing with the people.

Two of the pieces I felt needed the most revisions were the poems *On History* and *On Foreign Soil*. I can become obsessed with poetic writing, and will spend countless hours studying it and rephrasing it. I have a tendency to get excessive with a thesaurus when I write poetry, but it's a good practice to learn new vocabulary and make art out of words.

I built a stronger connection with the poems when I decided to volunteer at a poetry reading on Campus at the Black Box Cabaret. I wanted to challenge myself in a new way and become a better performer. I wanted to dial in my poetry the same way a stand up comedian would, by practicing it in front of a group of strangers. Before performing, I practiced the poem numerous times to make sure it sounded good spoken out loud, and then performed it at the

reading and received a supportive reaction from the crowd. This process really taught me that crafted writing has to be away from the classroom and obsessive, and the writing has to become a personal relationship with the writer.

Overall my senior project is related to trauma by demonstrating a family dealing with hate towards a country for the consequences of World War II. Understanding the trauma that was forced upon my Grandmother was an important message. We read about how she came to America, struggled living in a new country, and even had stones thrown at her when she lived in Germany. It demonstrates Sherryl's trauma because she still gets angry and upset when it comes to anything related to the holocaust. It also displays healing that took a 3rd generation Holocaust descendant to find, and come to terms with.

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