The Foerst's Daughter

With an excerpt from

... "Your History"

Patricia Hampl
FROM The Florist's Daughter

These apparently ordinary people in our ordinary town, living faultlessly ordinary lives, and believing themselves to be ordinary, why do I persist in thinking—knowing—they weren't ordinary at all?

What's back there? Back there, I say, as if the past were a location, geographic rather than temporal, lost in the recesses of old St. Paul. And how did it become "old St. Paul," the way I habitually think of it now, as if in my lifetime the provincial Midwestern capital had lifted off the planet and become a figment of history, and from there had ceased to exist except as an invention of memory. And all the more potent for that, the way our lives become imaginary when we try most strenuously to make sense of them.

It was a world, old St. Paul. And now it's gone. But I still live in it.

Nostalgia, someone will say. A sneer accompanies the word, meaning that to be fascinated by what is gone and lost is too easily seduced by sentiment. A shameful undertaking. But nostalgia shares the shame of the other good sins, the way lust is shameful or drink or gluttony or sloth. It doesn't belong to the desiccated sins of the soul—pride, envy. To the sweet sins of the body, add nostalgia. The sin of memory.

Nostalgia is really a kind of loyalty—also a sin when misapplied, as it so often is. But it's the engine, not the enemy, of history. It feeds on detail, the protein of accuracy. Or maybe nostalgia is a form of longing. It aches for history. In its cloudy wistfulness, nostalgia fuels the spark of significance. My place. My people.

Another old-St. Paul way of thinking: Mother talking about her people, meaning not the nation, but the clutch of family streaming back to illiterate Kilkenny, her Irish grandfather who wouldn't take up a gun during the Traverse des Sioux "Indian Uprising" (I couldn't shoot. I played with those boys), her mother one of "the seven beautiful Smith girls, tall as men," and their one lone brother, feebleminded, wandering the street with a small tin drum. And he the handsomest of them all. Pity, pity.

Or she would say my folks, that mild Midwestern descriptor. My people, my folks, Mother and Dad—M & D in the private patois of the fervent

journals I've kept all these years as if I were doing research for a historical novel forever incomplete because the research keeps proliferating. Until now. Now the research is almost done.

You're History

In May 1975, I quit a perfectly decent, if dispiriting, editorial job in St. Paul, bought myself a sky blue backpack and the cheapest transatlantic ticket I could find, and flew to London. From there, by Channel ferry and then by train, I lurched across western Europe to the Iron Curtain border town of Cheb, a cheerless crossing straight out of a Hollywood Cold War spy movie, where I finally achieved Czechoslovakia, thus reversing the late nineteenth-century journey my paternal grandparents had made when they emigrated, separately, from the Czech lands of the Hapsburg Empire to the American Midwest where they met and married in the Czech enclave of St. Paul near the Schmidt brewery.

On the Czech visa form, under the word "Profession," I had written with an impostor's bravado, "Writer." I hadn't published anything yet. Nor had I traveled before to Europe—or really, to anywhere. But that was the point: go to Prague, a certifiably exotic setting, and then write a book about it.

I did not undertake this mad Cold War leap "to find a self," as the dust jackets of so many memoirs routinely proclaim. Like legions of wandering souls of the notorious sixties bearing the hump of a backpack, I possessed more self than I knew what to do with. Though I wouldn't have put it this way at the time, I had quit my job and alarmed my mother (you can't go behind the Iron Curtain!) not to find a self but to find a history.

The significance of history was what my life sorely lacked. Of this I was certain. The emphasis here should be on the modifier—how sore I felt, had always felt, nursing the bruise of insignificance. This cultural ache is a heartland heritage, the flyover birthright. And
ridiculous partly because it's inaccurate—as if there were no "history" in the migrations that brought Europeans to middle America and exiled or, as we would say today, "cleansed" its native inhabitants—to name only one strand of the midwestern story.

This moody midwestern petulance has quite a provenance. "Yours from this hell hole of life and time," Scott Fitzgerald wrote peevishly from St. Paul to Edmund Wilson, his Princeton pal in louche and literary Greenwich Village. And in a late poem John Berryman, my humanities professor at the University, evoked Minneapolis with a bilious contempt I approved—"site without history!" Even the most celebrated Minnesota novel, Sinclair Lewis's Main Street, was an indictment of the small-mindedness of Gopher Prairie (really Sauk Centre, Minnesota, as I was painfully aware). There it was again: the dread midwestern theme of insignificance immortalized, its author awarded the Nobel Prize for nailing us.

I knew no one in Prague, didn't have the language, and had no identity or contacts to trade on. Fine. Aware of the paradox that I was traveling to what was, after all, my ancestral homeland, I would be a stranger in a strange land.

And I was. It seemed I was the only American in Prague in spring 1975, certainly the only one staying at the Paříž, a dingy art nouveau cream cake of a hotel. If it was meant to conjure Paris, the Paříž definitely was not, in those bleak Cold War times, a figment of the city of lights. The Alfons Mucha bas-relief decorative figurines wept sooty coal tears, the whole place was sepulchral, the dour restaurant and lounge resembling viewing rooms of a down-market funeral parlor. I could say pivo—beer—and often did, and potatoes—brambory. Beyond that I never knew what I would be served, because the purple mimeographed menus that bled onto my hands were in Czech and Slovak, German, Russian. Rarely in French, the only foreign language I could pretend to read. Never, if memory serves, in English.

I couldn't afford regular meals at the hotel anyway, even at the funny-money prices of Cold War Prague where the dollar bill had the heft of gold bullion. I dined on angry-looking sausages at stand-up canteens and kiosks on Václavské náměstí, orange grease oozing onto the flimsy paper plate next to a chunk of damp dark bread and a knob of horseradish-laced mustard. Or I sat in smoky cafés drinking silty coffee, making a meal of caffeine and sugar.

And I walked. And walked and walked. And walked some more.

I was walking—I was sure—in history. I couldn't read the signs on the buildings or in the museums, I could barely pronounce the street names, sounding them out like the illiterate I was. But the history I was greedily taking in, the necessary nutrient I had been missing, comprised not only old buildings and ancient smells (those medieval wine cellars, dank with the sedge of ages). I was accosted by the raw evidence of political reality and historical destiny on the twisting streets of Malá Strana leading to the Castle. And just as I'd always suspected, if inchoately, history wasn't just a story reconstructed from the past. It wasn't quite dead and gone. And it wasn't the tame pet I had nurtured at home. History was a beast. You could feel its hot breath seething down the city's miserable byways.

History radiated from living emblems everywhere on display. Before I met or spoke to a single soul, except to say "pivo, prosím" to the gloomy waiters padding over the threadbare carpets of the Paříž lounge, the city impressed on me its likewise gloomy political history as I wandered its streets. Aggressively primal red-and-yellow banners sagged and flapped from the ghostly neglected buildings testifying, I learned, to fraternal relations with "our Soviet brothers." Barely six years had passed since the Warsaw Pact invasion crushed the Prague Spring attempt to develop "socialism with a human face." The faces on the streets were all too human—morose, inward, afflicted. Is it possible that I never saw a smiling face on the street then or during subsequent trips I made to Prague in the late 1970s? Gray, gray—the buildings and the faces. Absurdly, I cannot remember a sunny day either, as if the weather were in sour conspiracy with the politics, held captive by the dark side of history. But that, we know, is memory at work, that most unrepentantly poetic faculty of mind. Still, it's all I have left as a weather report from that time.
Small, almost diffident plaques punctuated the blackened walls of Malá Strana buildings, noting the place where a boy or girl—the ages always seemed to be barely twenty—had fallen, shot by the retreating Nazis in the final desperate days of the war, early May 1945, exactly thirty years before my own May visit. Most of these shrines were decorated with fresh flowers (it was lilac time, as it had been during the uprising) or bore handmade tinfoil wreaths trailing streamers in the Czech colors—the same red-white-and-blue as America's.

I stopped in front of one glass-encased photograph on Karmelitská, the clattery 22 tram rattling past me, arrested by the black-and-white face of a dead girl—I couldn't think of her as anything else. Her features were noble as a statue's. A university student probably. The lilacs tucked into the flower holder attached to her picture were fresh. Who, I wondered idly, had decorated this modest memorial? Her parents—the thought came as a jolt. All of these private shrines affixed to the grimy buildings in the disintegrating city were probably tended by elderly mothers and fathers, still grieving loyally. History was that recent, that alive.

I had been correct, back in St. Paul, to believe that history was what John Berryman called “the rudiments of a soul” that a place must achieve, usually through brutal experience, in order to matter. I had rightly rebelled against the throwaway line: You're history, we say to indicate you're nothing, as if “history” were a synonym for forgetfulness, worthlessness, for the absence of memory. Surely it is an American idiom. Impossible to imagine a postwar European saying, “You're history .... That's history,” meaning fuhgeddaboudit, pal.

But history wasn't simply the glittery wash of significance I had longed for and imagined in my brooding flyover way. Until Prague, had I ever been able—or willing—to imagine its crushing reality, its indelible stain of dried blood? More to the point, having looked into the photographic face of the dead girl patriot on Karmelitská, how was I to respond to the humbling wake-up slap of historical empathy smarting on my earnest, unmarked, midwestern face?

You're History

Reader, I wrote a book. Those Cold War Prague visits and my memories of growing up in a Czech American family in St Paul came together to form A Romantic Education, published in 1981. The adjective in the title was (or was meant to be) ironic: just how romantic should—a person hope to be in the face of history, either personal or public? And what was the relation between public and private? Between history's story and a personal account?

And what on earth was this thing I had written?

It did not occur to me—or apparently to my publisher—that I had written something called “a memoir.” The word does not appear on the book jacket or in the catalogue copy. And when I was introduced to the business side of the writing life for the first time, I was dismayed when the no-nonsense sales rep hailed me by braying out, “Love your book. Don't know how to pitch it.”

Pitch it? I saw the tidy lozenge of my pink and gray book sailing over home plate—a swing, a miss.

It was explained to me that a sales rep had something like thirty seconds, a minute tops, to describe a book to a bookstore buyer. You'll love this novel about.... We're very excited to be publishing the definitive history of.... But how to describe my book in thirty seconds? I couldn't do it myself. The story of a young nobody traipsing around Prague, thinking about her girlhood in St. Paul and about history in “a faraway country” among “people of whom we know nothing”—in Chamberlain's immortal description of Czechoslovakia before Munich. Czechoslovakia was still far away, even less known or cared about after almost thirty years shrouded behind the Iron Curtain than it had been when the prime minister uttered those shameful words that ushered in World War II.

At readings, I was frequently introduced as a novelist by the English professors who invited me to their campuses, my book routinely described as a novel. It told a story, it was literary—must be fiction. Autobiographical—certainly, so what else but a novel? At the time, the word “memoir” conjured up the image of a retired army general turgidly refighting old battles or an aging starlet retailing old affairs.
Or at least a life story with some kind of harrowing tale-to-tell. My book was scant on battles, empty of erotic high jinks or personal alarms. Even my dentist brother was perplexed. What is this? You want to be a writer—sex and violence, sex and violence, Patricia.

In bookstores, where I crept around the shelves looking to see if my book was stocked, I found it—if I found it—wherever it had been pitched, as the sales rep would say. It might turn up in Women's Studies or European History or Travel Writing. Occasionally, inexplicably, in Art History (those descriptions of art nouveau buildings, perhaps?). In stores catering to a literary clientele, it was often sequestered on a narrow shelf labeled Belles Lettres or Essays. On a good day, it might surface in Biography (my high-profile neighbors tended to be Dashiell Hammett and Jean Harlow). And one unfortunate day, there it was, consigned to the dismal precincts of Self-Help.

I would give a lot to remember when I started thinking of my book as a memoir, when I began to think of myself as a memoirist. It would not have been a happy day.

There were two strikes against autobiographical writing, in my view. One was literary and bore kinship to my brother's clarion call for "sex and violence," which I reinterpreted to mean that real literature must be an act of creation. You constructed, out of experience and from the mysterious depths of the imagination, characters, setting, conflict, plot—call it a novel. The great works of magisterial fiction—think War and Peace—were inextricably bound to history but were better than history precisely because they subsumed it and thrillingly embodied it. They made history come alive because they fashioned characters who lived history right before us. Such fiction gave us not only history but the meaning of history in individual lives.

My other mistrust of autobiography was more personal: I had been brought up not to talk about myself, a worthy sanction, surely. You're History

And given my sense of being from Nowheresville, I had no impulse to protest this injunction. Besides, surely it was unfair to use other people—one's family, friends, people met on a train—people who were unsuspecting players in what we affectionately call real life and who were not, after all, the game subjects of journalism. And—another stumbling block—how could the first-person voice claim documentary reliability? Beyond that, who could possibly care about my life—which, in any case, was still just beginning as an adult? Hardly the time to write one's memoirs.

Stay away from all that. Write a novel. Or do your homework and write history. Or, if given to a fascination with individual lives, write biography.

I had tried.

My first intention, well before my trip to Prague, was to write a biography of my Czech grandmother—a virtual medieval peasant, classic immigrant, domestic worker in America, nonwriter of English, foreigner in our midst. She had lived a long life, to ninety. She lived near us and, later, with us, until I was out of graduate school.

Write about what you know. And did I ever know Nana.

I also felt, with the kind of burning passion that gives you the sustaining torque to write a book, that she mattered. She was part of history as nothing else around me was, as far as I could tell. She stood for—for what? For what I came to think of as the "lingering life of immigration." I wanted to write her biography as an act of history. She was my subject, but the theme was much larger than a single life and encompassed in my dreaming mind (the mind that caused me to quit my job and scare my mother by going to Prague) the evergreen story of American immigration, the narrative gift that keeps giving to our history and our culture.

My grandmother was dead several years when I came to all this. From childhood, I had the habit of asking her questions about her life in the Old Country, as she always called where she had come from. She never said "Bohemia." She always used the mythic term the "Old
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Country," as if to underscore the absolute abyss separating her Then, lost in the mist of the past, from the bland Now she shared with me.

But before I went to Prague, as I looked at my meager notes and thought of what I remembered about her life in the Old Country, I was dismayed to see how little, how heartbreaking little, there was to tell. I had perhaps two shards from the great funeral urn of her immigrant life: a description of Christmas Eve in her village (We walked in a procession, everyone with a candle, up to the church, a line of lights all the way up the hill, singing) and the pathos of her favorite meal at home—a potato, mashed with milk and butter. Butter, a holiday treat.

Besides that, what was there? That her brother Rudy had been shot in the leg for poaching on the noble's estate. She said "the noble" as if this weren't a category out of gothic fiction, out of a fairy tale.

What else? That her mother had died when she was two, and her father had married a woman who did not like her. And the astonishingly gracious forgiveness of the congenitally humble: She couldn't help it; she didn't know how to be a mother. It was more the poverty of this maternal coldness than the poverty of the family eking out a living as farm workers in south Bohemia that apparently occasioned her flight to America. That and moxie. She left home at sixteen and never returned, the two subsequent world wars effectively cutting off all communication over time.

This is what I had to work with by way of primary sources. I managed to spin this out to something like eighty pages of text, inflating the descriptions and larding the stringy lifeline with Czech history I was reading with growing absorption. But I knew, with that inner dread of self-knowledge that won't be assuaged, that my eighty pages were dead, the prose leaden. I could barely bring myself to read the manuscript, even to try to revise it. The deletion of an adjective or the change of a comma wasn't going to bring this Lazarus text to life.

I stuffed the eighty pages in a box and put the box in my closet behind the overshoes. Maybe I couldn't write a biography. It is hard to describe the depth of disappointment I felt in acknowledging this failure to myself. I knew my grandmother was not a subject for fiction—or not for fiction I wanted to write. I had no interest in writing historical fiction. I wanted to write history. I wanted to document the great historical experience in which she was perhaps a bit player—my bit player. I had worked as a journalist, and I thought I knew my grandmother, my subject, and I knew how to write sentences. Wasn't that enough?

Well, no.

About a month after abandoning the project, I wrote, out of sheer loving (and frustrated) commemoration, what I suppose would best be described as a rhapsody about my grandmother's garden behind the little house near the brewery in St. Paul and another piece about her Sunday dinners, extravaganzas of her cooking and baking skills. These were each several pages long and had no particular beginning, middle, or end. They were simply patches of prose. I put them away too. But with this difference: I had a mystified awareness that these pages, unlike the diligent eighty pages hidden away with my overshoes, were alive.

This was confusing. Was I writing fiction after all? No, this was documentation, as close to a record as I could hope to muster. It was memory, of course. But hadn't my descriptions of my grandmother in the unthinkable tedium of those first eighty pages also come from memory?

It came to me, with dismay, that the difference was—me. I had conscripted myself not only as the narrator of these two little evocations but as the searching self, the need-to-know protagonist. The urgency I recognized in the prose was not my grandmother suddenly resurrected but myself allowed to exist as an inquiring mind moving over the field of her existence. My need to know, even my uncertain hunches, the very lacunae of my knowledge and of the public record of history—all these were not problems but the lifeblood of the whole enterprise, the writing of a life.

I was still writing her life, still writing about history, about the "lingering life of immigration," but I was not doing so as a real or
hopelessly phony (those awful eighty pages!) authority, swaddled in sham objectivity. I was still committed to the truth and to what facts I could shore up. But I finally understood my job as the classic writerly one: to be an observer—not only of what I saw but of what I was thinking.

Memoir, for me, became an accumulation of images, the way a family album doesn’t provide a neat story line or even the facts but a collection of moments, pictures you have to sort out, muse about, wonder at. This is what we call “a world.” The job of the memoir was to make personal sense of it.

Memoir, then, was only partly the work of telling a story. It was also thinking about the meaning of the broken bits of a story constructed from looking at the unsorted snapshots, the shards left of a life. The roasted potato mashed with milk, the golden coin of butter, the singing voices in the candlelit line up a hill to the church, the shot whizzing across the noble’s estate, finding its prey, the brother’s shattered leg.

I saw my project as a work of historical reflection. Hence the trip to Prague. As I was to learn, autobiographical writing, which cannot pretend to have a plot like a novel, cleaves to the travelogue like a great narrative life-ring. If, as our most ancient metaphor has it, life is a journey, then a travel narrative is the natural form for a memoir. But the journey was not, for me, into the excavations of history but into the mystery of memory, its byways, its detours, its vistas. The method involved research—reading Czech history, reading other memoirs of Central Europe, the travel itself. In its even more intimate investigation of images, floating pictures, observations, and the silences of history, memoir shared the habits of lyric poetry, where the personal voice, idiosyncratic as it must be, is understood—and required—to be sovereign.

Perhaps I shouldn’t ask when I realized I was writing memoir. The more useful question would be to ask when the rest of the world—reviewers, readers, libraries, and bookstores—began to call books like mine “memoirs.” When did the memoir become part of the cultural landscape, a literary form whose purpose was understood not (or not entirely) as reminiscence but as a kind of contemporary quest literature, a genre of storytelling and essay writing enfolded together? A form inevitably wedded to the documentary commitment of history as well as to the psychological truths of fiction and the witness of poetry.

I can report that in 1992, when my second memoir, Virgin Time, was published—a book about my Catholic upbringing and an inquiry into the contemplative life that took me to Assisi to find St. Francis—bookstores routinely shelved it in Autobiography or Memoir. In the decade since I had written A Romantic Education, the form had sidled into the trade market neighborhood and quietly taken up prime real estate. And, as far as some critics were concerned, it began ruining literary property values.

The memoir has been, on the one hand, a startling success story in American publishing in the past quarter century. But it has also been literature’s changeling, the bad apple, ever suspect, slightly illegitimate, a brassy parvenu talking too much about itself. It has never entirely overcome the taint of chronic self-absorption. And it has been caught in lies, not something the novel or even poetry need worry about.

None of this troubled me as I went about writing my first two memoirs, because in both cases I had my sights set on a subject beyond myself. My subjects were the “lingering life of immigration” and the “contemplative life.” As I saw it, both of these books rose out of the life I had been dealt—Czech American and Catholic—but they weren’t about me. They were books in which I employed myself to investigate larger subjects. Both of these books involved a lot of research, a lot of travel, years of pursuit. And a focus on the bigger picture.

And I was reading other books that were kindred, in a sense creating from my reading a private canon of memoir. I had never read a memoir in college or later in graduate school. Who studied memoir?
Who went to graduate school to write it? You went to an MFA program in creative writing to write fiction or poetry. Nonfiction belonged to journalism.

Some of the books I was discovering were long available, though perhaps little read, like Alfred Kazin’s evocative postwar masterpiece *A Walker in the City*, and Czeslaw Milosz’s *Native Realm*, a Polish exile’s Cold War memoir by turns sternly intellectual and passionately lyrical. Others were more recent, magisterial works of witness from the long Soviet night like *Hope Against Hope*, by Nadezhda Mandelstam, and Eva Hoffman’s poignant *Lost in Translation*.

These writers used the autobiographical voice to penetrate dark, ignored corners of history. I could whistle my way past the literary jeers and criticisms of memoir as a form, the routine disdain, the accusations of self-absorption (and my own innate hesitations), by reminding myself of these essential works of the personal voice, spoken in the face of crushing historical reality. Talk about speaking truth to power—these were my heroes, and though my narrative position was far humbler, I honored these works above all.

“You’re not writing another memoir, I hope,” a celebrated novelist friend whose work I treasure said one day, as if he’d given me long enough to get over my bad habit. “When are you going to get to the real books?” Meaning, the novels. I thought, with bruised solidarity, of Leslie Fielder’s (mostly admiring) review of *A Walker in the City*, in which he accused Kazin of writing a book that “perversely refuses to become a novel.” I could do worse.

Then, relatively reassured about my enterprise, I wrote a book that flew in the face of my grand, rather heroically selfless claims about the memoir in the service of history. I wrote a book about being the daughter of my mother and father. A Mom and Pop book, a how-I-got-to-be-me memoir. Just the sort of memoir that is the butt of so much literary contempt, a contempt I had been willing to acquiesce to and, sometimes, even share—as long as my less self-regarding books were seen on a different plane entirely. A higher plane, of course.
I had written a sentence in my notebook that proved to be the book's launch, though I had actually written it in despair: *Nothing is harder to grasp than a relentlessly modest life.* My father's life, my mother's, indeed the life of my family and everyone we had known in St. Paul—modest, middling, gone now. It struck me, in the hush of grief, after they were gone, that this was a way in. More than that, this modesty was a *subject.* My father, my mother, their *world.*

The book I wrote, set on the final night of my mother's life, as I held her hand in the hospital, writing, with my other hand, her *obituary* for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press,* was a memoir of that modest world. *The Florist's Daughter* traveled nowhere on the globe as my other books had in my persistent search for historical meaning. The journey I made in this book was not geographic. It was entirely temporal, into history itself, the Depression that had formed my parents and deformed their hopes and dreams, the postwar life of hard work, the qualities of quiet idealism (my father) and furious political grudges (my mother), the sweep of their decades leading each of them to pure acquiescence. Theirs was the acquiescence of humble lives, lived well but without glory, as the world changed around them and left them at the side of the speedway.

This, then, was history. I had to acquiesce to it, too. I no longer had the illusion, no matter how well intentioned, that history was *Out There*—behind the Iron Curtain, in the dawn star of the Renaissance in Italy. It was possible—actually it was necessary—to write history from the inside if I hoped to preserve my bit of truth, put it forward on the great heap of history.

"Doubtless every family archive that perishes," Czeslaw Milosz wrote in *Native Realm,* "every account book that is burned, every effacement of the past reinforces classifications and ideas at the expense of reality. Afterward, all that remains of entire centuries is a kind of popular digest. And not one of us today is immune to that contagion." He, like all my heroes of memoir, had been writing out of the same sense of worthlessness that had haunted me. I had thought they at least—Milosz, Mandelstam, Hoffman, Kazin—had known they were writing about the great occasions of world history. Surely, with the deaths and exiles, the wars and political hauntings from evil times they had witnessed, endured, or inherited, they were assured the value of their enterprise in writing their lives.

But here it was again, evidence of the fragility of the homely detail, of intimate family life. This ordinariness is the fact of most of our lives. It is, paradoxically, what history strains against, in its recording of wars and migrations, glorious triumphs and traumatic changes. For this personal modesty of ordinary lives is what we mean, finally, by happiness. And happiness, it appears, is the opposite of what history usually concerns itself with.

This modesty is what must not be lost in the telling of our lives. The glory of the ordinary is an oxymoron, but ordinary life is family life, daily life, what we cherish and strive to sustain. Yet it is always lost, over and over, again and again, war by war, age by slippery age. And so to write an elegy, as I learned again with my book about my Mother and Dad, is to write history—and to write history is, inevitably, to write an elegy.