

Slovakia and the Archives of Belonging

by Eva Ferguson

I visualize memory as a foggy bridge that people cross countless times in their lives. And I like to think that the more often it is crossed, the more the fog dissipates.

I can see my younger self skipping across that foggy bridge, dragging me back to my childhood summers in Slovakia with my grandparents. They plead for me to return to how things used to be, convincing me that the grass is always greener on the other side and that nothing good has come from the change that I wished had arrived sooner and sooner.

My grandma grew up in Stolečné, a small settlement nestled within a valley crevice in the north Carpathians. I still spend my summers there in a cabin built by my great-uncle.

Stolečné used to be teeming with one-room log cabins full of large families. They farmed potatoes and other vegetables in the fields on either side of the valley.

Some of those cabins are gone now and the potato fields are dotted with wildflowers blossoming above rock slabs concealing soil once relied on for nourishment. Today, Stolečné is a summer getaway thirty minutes from the nearest city with only a handful of people residing in the cabins over the weekends. They spend their time renovating with the money they made in the cities, building and rebuilding upon the lost histories laid bare by the dug-up remnants of a ceramic plate.

When I was thirteen, I would spend afternoons with my grandma on our patio listening

to her talk, all the while her memory declining with Alzheimer's.

She spoke about her life in the valley during the mid-twentieth century: in the winters they slept with the farm animals in their rooms to keep warm, and she hated her mother's rutabaga soup; she walked several kilometers to and from her school every morning, even when the snow was up to her waist; Nazis lined up the men from the settlement and threatened to execute them; and it was unfair that communism made all people supposedly equal, and yet some were always more equal than others, to echo George Orwell.

It never occurred to my mind to tell me: take out your phone, record this conversation, or catch it some other way, because you will lose it to the claws of nostalgia and regret.

While my grandmother spoke, she was neither in the present nor in the past, but rather in between what once was and no longer will be. She harbored a separate reality within a corner of her deteriorating mind that pulsed with life. She would point in various directions while speaking, motioning to the vast expanse of the valley, those cabins with families she still knew by name now gone — and the upbringing she had talked about while shaking her lowered head replaced with idyllic weekend getaways.

Having effectively rebirthed as a new country in January 1993, Slovakia is young. I wanted to know how other young Slovaks preserve their pasts, archive fading memories, and reconcile their own hauntings. How do they connect with history while welcoming the sociopolitical and cultural growth of their country?

Before passing away at the age of 102, Tamara Selecka's (25) great-grandmother had been a prolific seamstress, using old tea cans as storage space for her threads. 'It's quite a common thing, but it's a constant reminder of her.' They are artifacts that reflect the older generations, she told me.

If generational histories are overshadowed by actions one does not condone, reconciling memories can be difficult.

Sabina (31) was born and raised in Slovakia and has lived abroad since she was eighteen. Her family is from Harvelka in the northwestern region of Kysuce. She elaborated on the generational rift between older and younger generations of Slovaks: 'Older generations have gone through such identity trauma that it's sometimes hard to be able to have an open communication where two might respectfully disagree. It's not an easy concept to them.'

Sabina had to effectively teach herself more about her own country: 'I've gone through the whole education in Slovakia, and I feel as though we were taught what the country wanted us to know. This has brought me to be quite unprepared to face the facts of the world - I had to painfully learn myself.' Sabrina told me these include 'the institutional racism and segregation still prevalent in Slovakia today towards Roma minorities.'

She further elaborated on a particular memory she is attempting to reconcile: 'My great-grandmother was a maid for a well-to-do Jewish family, and I only heard really good things about them and how they treated her. There were occasions where my great-grandmother was asked to help by hiding some jewelry. And yet none of my family members did anything that I know of to help anyone to either escape or keep their belongings until they (hopefully) come back. Which makes me feel weird and I carry that guilt around quite a bit. Then there is this candle holder made of pure silver that has always been one of my favorite pieces of memorabilia; it's absolutely stunning.'

Sabina later discovered that there were two candle holders; specifically Jewish Shabbat candles that originally belonged to her great-grandmother's maid's family. 'This is a dark memory that keeps me grounded in not overromanticizing my young country's past but also

acknowledging the poverty that railed my country for centuries of being invaded and treated horribly.’

Tamara feels that generations born after the 1989 Velvet Revolution who did not grow up in political turmoil, ‘don’t know what it’s like to be isolated from the outside world.’ She believes ‘events can change generations and change perspectives on different things and topics.’

Matica Slovenská is a Slovak cultural, scientific, and publishing institution founded in 1863. Pavol Madura, the Director of Archives, told me one of the many goals of the institution is to ‘cultivate and support Slovak literature and nurture the arts.’ He said their archive is a well of wisdom. ‘Every document in the archive requires the attention of the archivist.’

Institutions such as Matica Slovenská are paramount to the preservation of Slovakia’s history; but equally as important is one’s individual commitment, such as Martin Hochel’s (22) to understanding one’s own belonging and identity in relation to their country’s histories.

Originally from Bratislava, Martin is currently studying for his master’s degree in Vienna. When he was sixteen, his great-great-uncle passed away at the age of 101. He grew up in the Austro-Hungarian empire, survived WWI, and fought in WWII.

‘I already knew that this person was someone special,’ Martin said. ‘I remember thinking what to ask, and if I should ask because he was ninety-nine at the time.’

Eventually, they spoke: ‘I noted everything down because I mean, the people he met were historical figures in the history of Slovakia. But I keep on asking, maybe I should have asked different questions. Or it would have been so much more interesting to ask maybe more specific questions or sort of more personal questions. But that was a very special meeting.’

Martin is interested in the digitization of graveyards, in which genealogical records are made accessible online. He has done extensive research on websites about his generational

history: 'I found a lot of relatives like this in the last few years.'

While researching the Nation's Memory Institute, Martin discovered that his grandfather was subjected to interrogation and accused of being a spy: 'He was against the socialist regime. So, they had a nickname for him. And they collected files about his private life.'

Mike Stolarik is Professor Emeritus at the University of Ottawa where he was also Chair of Slovak History and Culture. An object can tell the story of a desire for community and belonging. It was common for Slovaks in North America to join a fraternal benefit society such as the First Catholic Slovak Union and others, Stolarik told me. He collected the tokens they used as symbols of their identity and community: 'They all had badges and banners that they would wear at meetings,' with the badges being worn at funerals to identify themselves as members of a certain society.

Francesca Davanzo is an archivist with the Council of the European Union responsible for ensuring the legalities of the institution's activities. 'The contextual understanding of a particular document is most important, as it avoids the creation of any fake news, and can lead to incorrect interpretation,' she told me. Although equally as important as an archivist, she stressed the importance of the role of a historian: 'The historian's role is to elaborate and interpret this information.'

When there is no one to interpret the stories of one's family, on whose shoulders does that responsibility lie? We are our own archivists: collecting and organizing memories and generational stories — as well as historians: interpreting and analyzing our personal histories when those they belonged to are no longer living.

It is in these instances whereby perhaps young Slovaks become the historians to interpret and sift through genealogical data; and maybe even take part in revising their own

histories.

I remember finding my grandfather's discarded military badges in a trinket box in my grandparents' attic. He was bitter and jaded. I now understand he was not showing contempt towards the life he had, but rather the life he could have had that was denied at the hands of the communist regime. He never spoke about his past, and so I never tried to talk to him about it. But as a child, it would have been impossible for me to understand the trauma he endured as part of the resistance against the Communist Party in the second half of the 1960s.

This generational skepticism could deter young Slovaks from speaking to their elderly relatives — be it out of worry that their conversations will unknowingly resurface memories of traumatic experiences, or from the assumption that they will have no desire to speak about the oppression-free lives that they had so longed for.

At times, one may need to turn to the arts to create new methods of preserving generational histories and family stories — and one Slovak artist is doing just that.

Annamaria Mikulik (38) is a product designer from the northeastern region of Spiš. She works in contemporary design, using materials and physical phenomena centering on themes of sustainability and ecology and creates minimalist jewelry under her brand, NATIF.

'My work reflects a lot of my world view, my awareness of the continuum with my previous generations and the importance of moving the continuum to the next generations,' Annamaria told me. In her project, 100% PURE NATURAE, she designed five pieces of jewelry using time-degradable natural materials to reflect a 'perfect fusion with nature.' Part of her design compilation includes rings infused with additives from natural sources, such as pollen, a 'microelement' that has been 'persisting for millions of years as a legacy to future generations.'

The rings can also be infused with a plant seed. ‘The ring with the apple seed always reminds me of my grandmother, and the walks we would take together in her garden. With the taste of an apple, I absorb my family’s stories and my ancestor’s experiences and knowledge. There are traces of my own identity in my works.’

I like to think we clear the foggy bridges of memory - built by nostalgia and regret and designed to transcend generational differences - by analyzing and interpreting artifacts and genealogical data. When necessary, we adopt the functions of historian and archivist to understand our pasts, and in doing so better cultivate a sense of belonging.

Maybe the perception that youth (and in some ways, older generations) have of belonging can be subverted from one of past confinement to one of memorializing what once was with the memorabilia we have collected. Doing so will reveal not closure or peace, but a newfound perspective on our lives through interactions beyond the grave.

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