

# ROOTS OF SILENCE

how re-tracing my family's WWII escape routes and bearing witness to their breaking of long-held silences unexpectedly led me to compassion, an open heart, and my voice

Rebecca Kill  
January 2023

# ROOTS OF SILENCE

how re-tracing my family's WWII escape routes and bearing witness to their breaking of long-held silences unexpectedly led me to compassion, an open heart, and my voice

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Oral History  
of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2023

Rebecca Kiil  
January 2023

## dedication

She had her say.

We are having ours.

This is dedicated to the men who were robbed of theirs.

## table of contents

prologue .....	i
introduction .....	ii
i. my journey .....	1
ii. body. my father .....	9
iii. heart. my grandmother .....	20
iv. voice. my grandfather .....	31
v. fantasy oral history.....	45
vi. conclusion.....	75
vii. epilogue .....	88
viii. acknowledgements .....	90
ix. notes.....	92
x. works cited .....	96

## prologue

**Silence [1:27]:** Listen to the clip [here](#).

Silence.  
People are silenced every day.  
By governments, institutions, other people, their own families.  
People also silence themselves.

.....

There were no men on my mother's side of the family.  
Not only had they all disappeared or been taken during the war ...  
my mother's father, grandfather, uncle  
... but there was **no mention** of them or their names in our house or our family.  
Nor remembrances of their birthdays.

With the exception of the one photograph I remember my mother having of her father, Harald, in her bedroom, there were no other photographs that included them – alone or amongst a crowd.  
No conversations about them in memories of family parties or rituals.

For the women who lost them, I'm sure thoughts of them were ever-present.  
But for those of us who never knew them, they might as well never have existed.  
I understand *now* the need for the women's silence *then*. It must have been a matter of survival.

But for me, the silence left a void.  
*A missing-ness.*  
And a *missing-ness* creates ripples.  
Across generations.



My mother's father, Harald Tuul



My mother's grandfather, Karl Pärn



My mother's uncle, Endel Pärn

## introduction

War and the accompanying violence—anywhere in the world, at any time in history—tears nations apart, rips communities apart, blows families apart. The immediate, real-time effects are deadly, disorienting, dehumanizing. But the physical and emotional trauma doesn't stop there, at the time during which the event occurs. The collateral damage echoes exponentially across generations.

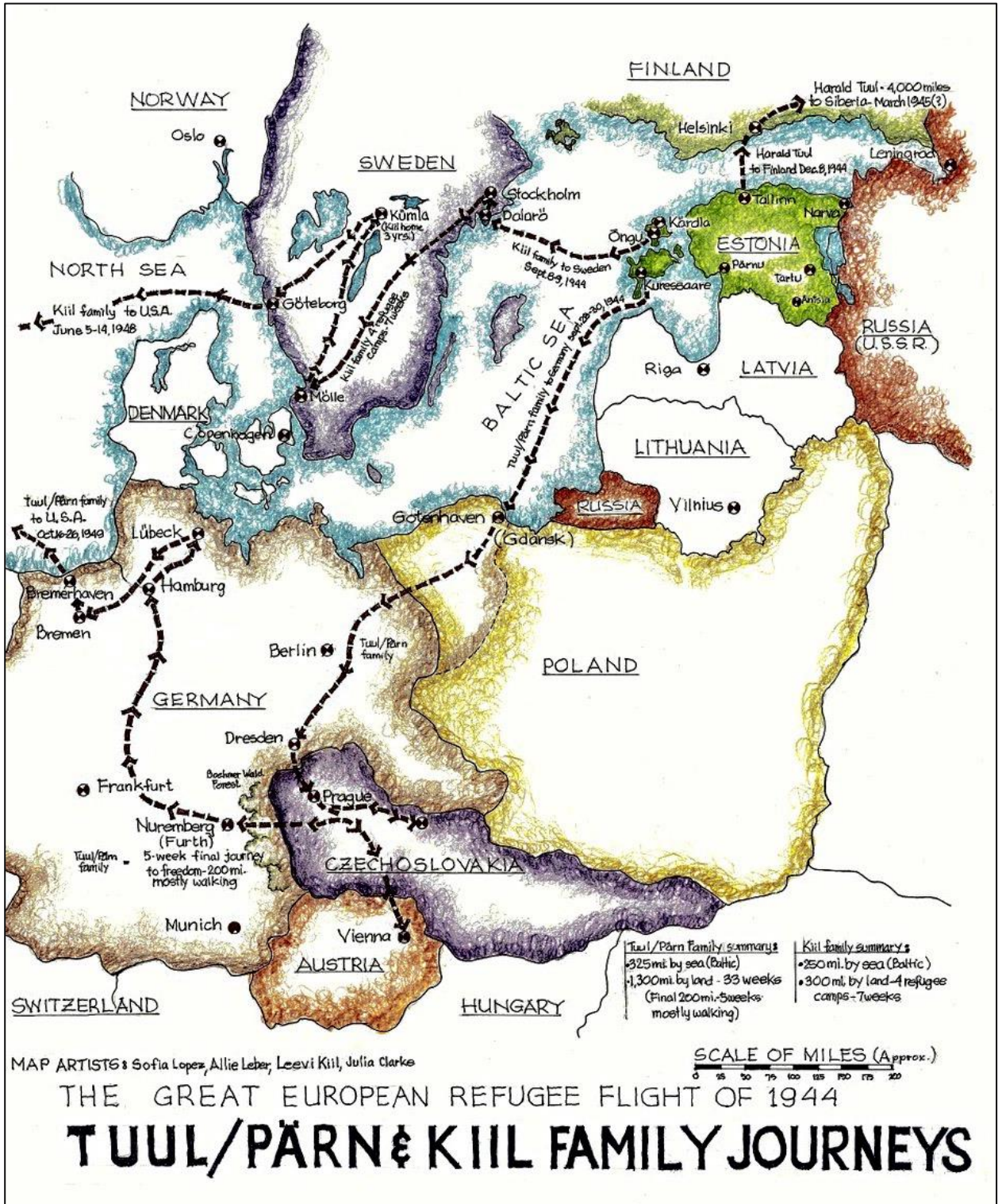
I am the child of refugees. My parents' families fled from their homeland of Estonia, one of the Baltic States bordering Russia, in September 1944 when my parents were small children. They left because of the dueling German and Soviet occupations that ripped the country apart during World War II. Estonians, who longed to regain the independence they'd enjoyed before the war, were caught in the middle of these two powerful enemies.

The various routes the different members of my family took out of Estonia (some of their own free will, others not) were typical of the routes of the approximately 70,000 Estonians who left when the Soviet army invaded Estonia for its second occupation in 1944. (Put into context, the first Soviet occupation of Estonia lasted from 1939 to 1941, the German occupation lasted from 1941 to 1944, and the second Soviet occupation lasted from 1944 to 1991.)

Some Estonians fled by sea to Sweden, like my father's family, who were rescued in the middle of the night by a fishing boat and taken to Sweden, where they lived in refugee camps for several years until they were sponsored to go to New York. My father's family was fortunate in that they fled together and remained intact during the war years and afterward.

Others fled westward, like the women in my mother's family. They traveled by ship, by train, and by foot across Europe, living for several years in various displaced persons (DP) camps in Germany until they were sponsored to come to the United States. My mother's family, not as fortunate as my father's, was torn apart by the war.

Still others were not able to escape and were captured, killed, or sent to Siberian labor camps, like my mother's father and grandfather. And then there were those whose fates are still unknown, more than 80 years after they disappeared, like my mother's uncle, who was a student involved in an anti-Communist group. He was arrested and disappeared, and his official fate was unknown. My family never received information or an official report about his death, only rumors that when the Soviet officers came to his workplace to arrest him, he jumped out a third-floor window to escape, was injured in the fall, then was captured and summarily executed.



## my family

my father: Leevi Kiil

my mother: Mall Kiil

my sister: Sandra Kiil

**me: Rebecca Kiil**

my husband: Fernando Lopez

my daughter: Sofia Kiil Lopez

my brother: Allan Kiil

## my father's family

my grandfather: Evald Kiil

my grandmother: Meta Kiil

my aunt: Eha Brownell

my father: Leevi Kiil

my uncle: Toivo Kiil

## my mother's family

my great-grandfather: Karl Pärn

my great-grandmother: Alvine Pärn

my great-uncle: Endel Pärn

my grandfather: Harald Tuul

my grandmother: Aino Tuul Kaevats

(We call her "Memme")

my mother: Mall Tuul



I've spent much of my life as a detective, researching and seeking the sources of some of the painful patterns I've witnessed in myself and family members so I could reverse them—without much success. Some of my own patterns included frequent, heart-stopping nightmares; a sense of overwhelm that led to emotional meltdowns no matter how many miles I ran, minutes I meditated, or green smoothies I drank; and a general, illogical distrust of men. The overwhelming-leading-to-meltdowns conundrum was one I passed on to my daughter – she threw wicked tantrums long past her terrible twos – so my interest in breaking these patterns extended beyond myself directly into her future.

My siblings and I grew up hearing the stories of my grandparents' war-time experiences. But my maternal grandmother did not reveal much about her experiences until she was in her 90s. When she was 96 years old, she and I began working together to fully document her escape from Stalin's brutal regime. Within the first year or two of my work with my grandmother, I heard an interview with Dr. Rachel Yehuda, an expert on epigenetics.<sup>1</sup> That interview was the first time I'd heard that traumatic events, including communal trauma, can alter a person's DNA, and those changes can be passed down physiologically through generations. As I listened to my grandmother's stories about the experiences she hadn't previously shared, those stories and our conversations started to reveal patterns that I had always assumed were uniquely mine but that were, in fact, markers – little clues left scattered for me to follow. Yehuda's work got me thinking about which, if any, of the other markers I'd noticed in myself and my extended family (and perhaps my daughter) might be the result of the trauma experienced by both sides of my family during the war.

I have spent the past decade researching, unearthing, listening to, and recording the histories of my family members and other Estonians who fled during World War II: how they fled, what life was like in the displaced persons (DP) camps or refugee camps where they lived as they awaited sponsorship, and how their lives continued once they settled permanently. My understanding and interpretation of the interviews I've conducted have been profoundly impacted by the classes I've taken and experiences I've had during my four years as part of Columbia's Oral History Master of Arts (OHMA) Program.

Thinking about my family project within the context of oral history challenged me beyond what I formally learned as well. As an oral historian, I believe in the value of a single person's story in their own words, in the exchange between the speaker and the listener, in the interchange between the testimony and the witness. How then do I tell the story of my grandfather, whose voice I've never heard, whose voice was *silenced* – by the government, censors, family? How do I preserve the stories of my family members who were forcibly disappeared? How do I record their stories if they are not around to tell us what happened? Do I say I cannot conduct their oral history? Do I say I can conduct oral histories *about* them but not *of* them, or that I'd apply their story to a practice other than oral history? If I see the role of oral historian as one of amplifying voices that do not traditionally hold the narrative space, what does that mean for voices that have been silenced?

Finally meeting and getting to know the ghosts of my family through my grandmother has answered questions and raised so many more. Most of these questions I cannot answer. Many of them will continue to inform my work as an oral historian. Is this methodology applicable once the moment to record first-person testimony has passed? Who gets to tell the story and what do they get to tell? Who didn't get to speak and what is our obligation to them?

## i. my journey

### the project

My grandparents' stories about their war-time experiences were the backdrop of every family gathering. We were fortunate in that both sides of our family spent all holidays together – maybe because they were immigrants and the extended families were small, or maybe because my parents met in youth group at my paternal grandfather's church, so the families were already a part of each other's lives. In any case, we were all always together, and every family meal for any occasion inevitably ended with coffee, cake, and the stories.

Unlike the rest of our grandparents, however, my maternal grandmother did not reveal much about her full experience aside from a few repeated anecdotes. She wasn't ready to speak about it until she was in her 90s. Actually, when she was ready, she *wrote* down her experiences on 100 legal-size pages, double sided, and then asked me to help her type them up so we, her grandkids (and our kids), would have the stories once she was gone. She felt a great responsibility as the last of the living grandparents to pass on the stories and to warn anyone who would listen of the dangers of communism.

It's strange to think about now, but this project started out with my thinking I'd have to make time in my busy schedule to help her, thinking that I was doing *her* a favor. She'd been asking me for several years already. We'd even started a few years earlier, but then I had a baby and was working full-time, and my daughter was having health issues, and ... well, life. And anyway, I thought I *knew* all the stories ... I'd heard them all my life. Like the one about the wagon, the miracle story about how it appeared when they needed it, and it disappeared when their need for it passed.

In 2013, when she was 96 years old and I was in my 40s, I re-engaged and paid attention. It didn't take long for me to realize, as I typed up her pages, that there was so much more to this story than she'd ever told us. I also realized that participating in this endeavor was not going to be something I'd need to "make time for." I almost immediately could not get enough. Shortly after starting to type her manuscript, I was talking to my friend Deb about all the new information I was learning and she was crystal clear: "Rebecca, you need to start filming your grandmother telling her stories, immediately!"

Film? Me? No. I'm a photographer, but strictly film, and strictly black and white. Very low tech, not even digital. The last thing I could imagine taking on was teaching myself film and interviewing techniques. Deb assured me that it didn't matter how poorly, "just film her!" That's where this began.

My husband, Fernando, helped me figure out some of the technology early on, and my grandmother and I came up with a plan for how she would tell her story, while we simultaneously worked on her written memoir. I filmed the interviews on a DSLR camera, so I was able to use the same camera for both video and photography. After fumbling along for a while on my own, I returned to the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies in Portland, Maine (where I'd spent three months in a graduate documentary photography program years earlier) for a week-long intensive

in digital multimedia. In that one week, I learned an incredible amount of technology and craft for documentary filmmaking. We learned hands-on by interviewing subjects we arranged ourselves. I found an Estonian-American living close by whose family also fled during World War II. She agreed to be interviewed about her family's story.

I realized that in addition to my grandmother's story, there were so many other Estonians whose stories needed to be captured. This woman was around my parents' age, so she was also a child when her family fled, but she had memories of life in the DP camps. It was my first time interviewing someone I'd never met before. It was terrifying, but also an incredible experience of trust (me in myself, and the subject's in me).

After a while, my grandmother's friends, also Estonians, began approaching me to record their stories. No one had asked to hear their stories of escape. One woman was in her late 90s, another gentleman was 100 years old. My grandmother and her friend hadn't even shared their stories with each other. I was the first person to hear that friend's experience. I came to learn that Estonians *just did not discuss* what they had been through. I could not understand why. If they had the same shared experience, wouldn't it have helped to talk about it with friends, wouldn't that have eased the burden somehow?

The most significant takeaway for me, once I started filming my grandmother and then people outside of our family, was the enormous sense of responsibility I felt. I felt the weight of these stories – not just as a witness to them but also of having them physically stored on my equipment, on my hard drives and wondering what I could do with them, who needed to see them, where I could store or preserve them so they'd be safe, how I should catalog them, who I should contact about them?

Every step I took to improve my skills or expand my work or my reach in some way increased the stakes. I felt increasingly out of my depth. I occasionally researched documentary film programs or classes to try to find something that sounded like it might be a good fit for our project, a place where I could find some resources for the work my grandmother and I were doing. I needed people to talk to, people who were doing similar work so I could ask questions, get ideas. There was only so much I could learn by researching. I was craving a community, a mentor, some support. But what kind?

Documentary made sense based on my past multimedia experience and education, but it wasn't exactly right ... then I stumbled upon the Columbia University Oral History Master of Arts (OHMA) program, not even knowing previously that oral history was a field. Suddenly everything fell into place. I'd been unknowingly doing oral history for years, decades even, with my family – even recording my great-aunt and great-uncle on their farm in Canada with a cassette recorder many years earlier. I knew as soon as I walked into the OHMA open house that I'd finally found my place.

## Columbia Oral History Master of Arts (OHMA) program

As a part-time student, I've had the opportunity to work with several cohorts and I've also been able to take several classes outside of OHMA that have provided critical context for my project. Taking several years to complete the coursework has also allowed me to focus on different aspects of the work at different times. My grandmother was 101 years old and still very engaged with our project during my first year at OHMA, so I focused that first year on maximizing my time with her, creating an end-of-year exhibit in which she was able to participate, and inviting her into the classroom for a public interview with my cohort. Providing multiple venues and formats where people could engage with her and her story was powerful for me to experience and witness, and it was validating for her after having been silent for so long. After my grandmother passed away, I continued the work she and I started but was also able to focus on other areas that interested me. OHMA's influence on my work and life has been, and will continue to be, profound as what I've learned continues to generate ideas and new meaning. I want to highlight a few concepts that have significantly impacted my understanding of my family history and this project, as well as the trajectory of my work as an oral historian.

### ethical loneliness and harm/repair

The concept I've studied at OHMA that has had perhaps the biggest impact on me, my work as an oral historian, and my understanding of my grandmother's situation and her silence is the concept of ethical loneliness and its related notions of harm and repair.

My grandmother experienced multiple layers of harm. She lost all the men in her family, she was forced to flee her homeland, she lived as a refugee for five years, and she never experienced an acknowledgement of or reparation for any of her losses by anyone (nor have any Estonians). Would repair ever be possible? What would repair even look like to Estonians or their children and grandchildren?

After studying Jill Stauffer's concept of ethical loneliness within the context of the socio-political conditions in Europe and the United States post-World War II, I began to understand how it might have been difficult for someone like my grandmother to discuss what she'd experienced and why she stayed silent until her 90s. There seemed to be no understanding of what those countries invaded by the Soviets had experienced and, therefore, little ability for "just-minded people to hear well":

Ethical loneliness is the isolation one feels when one, as a violated person or as one member of a persecuted group, has been abandoned by humanity, or by those who have power over one's life's possibilities. It is a condition undergone by persons who have been unjustly treated and dehumanized by human beings and political structures, who emerge from that injustice only to find that the surrounding world will not listen to or cannot properly hear their testimony—their claims about what they suffered and about what is now owed them—on their terms. So ethical loneliness is the experience of having been abandoned by humanity compounded by the ... failure of just-minded people to hear well.<sup>2</sup>

I mentioned how strange I found it that my grandmother and her close friends hadn't ever spoken to each other about their experiences. Hannah Arendt determined that no one had the patience for

these sad refugee stories and the people coming from these situations didn't dare be seen as ungrateful, so even "among ourselves we don't speak about this past."<sup>3</sup> One source of pain (harm?) that was shared by most of the people I interviewed was that it seemed like no one knew about what happened to them and no one seemed to care that much. Repair, for it to be comprehensive, would have to involve recognition by the larger community (outside the Estonian American community). "Speaking and being heard where before there was silence – whether because the story was too painful for the victim to tell or there was no community willing to listen – can be a powerful experience."<sup>4</sup>

In OHMA's course about oral history and human rights, we studied Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, which provided invaluable context for my family's interviews and memories because the 1986 Chernobyl accident occurred during Soviet times. Many of the themes expressed by the narrators or the way the government responds to individuals resonated with me on a visceral level. The narratives and the way Alexievich presents them give such a depth of context for a political and social system that seems hard for us as Americans to grasp. I feel like I have understood shadings, feelings, abstractions of that social system from the dark stories of my family's past, but her construction of this narrative brought the dynamics of a society in which these multiple layers of harm were enabled to occur into much sharper focus – what Estonians (and other occupied nations) were fighting against and forced to live within. Because of what my mother's family experienced (losing all the men), this passage has particular resonance. Anna Petrovna Badaeva laments the men who are gone:

... in every house, someone's died. On that street, on the other side of the river— all the women are without men, there aren't any men, all the men are dead. On my street, my grandfather's still alive, and there's one more. God takes the men earlier. Why? No one can tell us. But if you think about it—if only the men were left, without any of us, that wouldn't be any good either. They drink, oh do they drink! From sadness.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, in her 1996 analysis of the U.S. post-WWII secret military policy of repatriation, Donna Dismukes provided additional context for me about the layers of harm that may have contributed to my grandmother's silence and sense of ethical loneliness. Dismukes explains the agreement the U.S. and Britain secretly signed with the Soviet Union to repatriate, or send back to the Soviet Union, any individuals the Soviet Union considered "Soviet citizens."<sup>6</sup>

During World War II, the Soviet Union was the United States' ally. The United States didn't realize, or didn't want the U.S. public to realize, that Stalin was killing millions of his own people. The U.S. military assumed no one would care about this repatriation policy or that no one would care about Soviet citizens, as there was an extensive pro-Soviet propaganda campaign in the U.S. at the time. However, the policy did end up being controversial within the military, because the soldiers who had to carry out this order quickly saw how desperately the individuals who were being rounded up to be sent to the Soviet Union were behaving in order to avoid going: "biting into each other's jugular veins, impaling themselves on broken glass, and jumping off speeding trains as a means of escaping return."<sup>7</sup>

In her report, Dismukes clearly outlines the extent of the pro-Soviet propaganda campaign, which spanned media and the military on both sides of the Atlantic and into the DP camps. I always wondered why my grandmother didn't talk about her experiences to her trusted friends or colleagues earlier in her life. But after fleeing from the Soviet regime and then spending five

years in DP camps, I try to imagine how she might have felt finally arriving in the U.S. and becoming aware of the pro-Soviet sentiment. Would she have thought people could understand her story even if she did try to tell them? As Dismukes illustrates, “Uncle Joe” Stalin was seen that time as our ally against Hitler. It would have been hard for my grandmother’s story to have been heard in that environment. Hitler’s atrocities were clear-cut and easy for Americans to understand because the U.S. had been invested in that fight for years. As far as the general American public was concerned, our ally Stalin was “a bit eccentric but a nice guy nonetheless.”<sup>8</sup>

## embodiment

Maria Cotera and her approach to the oral histories of the Chicana feminists of her mother’s generation, an approach she calls *encuentro*, helped re-frame how I see the oral history interview and my role within that space. Cotera’s approach to oral history challenged me to evaluate why I am doing this work, who I’m doing it for, and who I want to ultimately benefit from it. Because I was exposed to Cotera’s work early in my time at OHMA, I made a conscious shift to make my work with my grandmother not only about recording but also about spending time with her.

Cotera helped me define for myself that I wanted to create a practice with the intention of making space for and listening to elders tell their stories. This idea of “encuentro,” of spending time with people, listening to them, sharing a meal with them, is something Maria Cotera explained so beautifully in this statement she made during her OHMA workshop series presentation:

We go into women’s homes. We listen to them, we have coffee with them, we stay up late with them, we scan their archives ... We spend up to 12 hours in some of these homes ... that sort of deep engagement is what I have called the archive of *encuentro*.

Embodiment pertains to the embodied memory with which I enter any interview. It relates to the act of deep listening: using my whole body, present with that person at that time, to absorb what is being told; and then walking away from that interview with that story remaining in my body, going forward with that story, changed by it.

Many of the narrators I have interviewed were elderly, sometimes *very* elderly. I think all oral history interviews require this, but I know that the older narrators absolutely require my time, plenty of it, and an encounter, or rather Cotera’s concept of “encuentro,” that is on their terms, is not rushed, is not a transaction but rather an experience of sharing, of humility, of patience. These narrators have lived full lives but lives in which, for the most part, their stories were hidden, or half told – for varied reasons.

Embodiment takes on additional meaning and layers within the context of interviews with my family members and this project. I embody the experiences, the stories, the trauma, both sides of my family experienced. Those stories that I heard, or overheard, from under the table or in the den of my grandparents’ houses – those stories live in my body. That story about the wagon? Those stories ... they were miracle stories in the eyes of my grandparents. Their deep faith in their God had carried them through those horrible chapters in their lives to a peaceful place where their children grew up safe and thrived. But some of those stories terrified me. This project has been, and will continue to be, an attempt to uncover and understand some of that history. I hope my work will enable my daughter, Sofia, to understand who I, and all the women who come

before her are, as women, mothers, and human beings; to fully embrace the light and dark sides of herself, her body, and her own power; and to develop compassion for people whose worlds have been turned upside down and are forced to start over with nothing, in a new place, among strangers.

### shared authority

I came into OHMA from a documentary background and learned about the oral history ethic of shared authority. This work of ongoing negotiation with our collaborators – from the initial meeting throughout the interview process, review and editing of transcriptions, and up and until a final work is produced – while challenging, time consuming, and sometimes frustrating, felt true to the work I was doing with my grandmother and the projects I hoped to pursue in the future:

Together narrator and listener negotiate what the narrator must tell, wants to tell, tries to shape into a coherent narrative, and cannot bear to tell ... Those who listen to life histories seek to do no harm to their storytellers, their audiences, or themselves. The hope is that in the telling there is solace, and in the interpretation, there is personal, social, or historical understanding ... Given an intellectual, cultural, or social context, the stories that once haunted people's lives through the power of secrecy can no longer irreparably harm them and may provide understanding about larger issues of history and memory.<sup>9</sup>

Many aspects of this work involve thinking about the implications of shared authority. Because my work has involved my family, my navigation through the various types of authority – with my collaborators and within myself – was multifaceted and multi-layered. I will explore my challenges with shared authority within the context of my project further throughout this thesis.

### memory

The events I'm asking my narrators about occurred almost 80 years ago. I am very aware of the enormity of the gap between the actual events and the narrators' telling of them. Sometimes the narrators' memories are clear, other times the reflections are muddled. Sometimes the narrator is stoic, as if they have told the story thousands of times; other times, the story is filled with emotion as if he or she is telling it for the first time. Sometimes the narrator is vibrant and strong and living among others; other times, he/she is feeble and alone.

On the one hand, I can think about memory in the context of my grandmother and the other elderly narrators I've worked with. But I've realized there is another layer to this concept of memory. The generation that escaped as children has a lot of confusion about which memories are theirs and which they adopted as theirs through hearing the stories so many times. This seems to bother them – which memories are “real” memories, as though the other stories are not authentically theirs if they don't remember them themselves. My mother has so many “blank” spots, things she just cannot remember and that bothers her. Both my parents say that they have no memories of fear. I suspect that this is how their brains protected them from the trauma.

I am interested in truth, a person's lived truth. That may not necessarily align with “facts”. I want to create an oral history practice that strives to create space for, and allows me to be a witness to, these narrators' creation of meaning from the events they have experienced.

## refugee studies

I studied oral history in the context of human rights, and I also studied the history of the refugee regime to try to understand the historical context of what my family had experienced during the war. My mother's family lived in various DP camps in Germany for five years, from 1944 to 1949. My father's family lived in church-sponsored refugee camps in Sweden from 1944 to 1948. It was out of this research that I was introduced to Donna Dismukes' 1996 master's thesis about the U.S. military policy of repatriation post-WWII, which was mentioned earlier. This report was impactful for many reasons. When I reviewed my grandmother's interviews after understanding the policy, I realized one of the incidents my grandmother often described could easily have resulted in my mother's family being "repatriated" or sent to the Soviet Union. Since my family escaped from Estonia while the Soviet Army was invading their country, they could have been sent to Siberia, prison, or their death if the American soldier at one of the checkpoints had not resisted the order of the Russian soldier. I read Dismukes' report and went back through my grandmother's interviews to find all the places where she had discussed this particular interaction with the Russian and American soldiers in her interviews.

**You Have to Go Back to Estonia [0:53]:** Listen to the clip [here](#).

**My grandmother, Aino Tuul:** We started going, but we couldn't get out of this town. There was a checkpoint. And they were holding us up. There was an American, and a Russian, and a Czechoslovakian. And I tried to squeeze [from my brain] English.

**Me:** You had learned English?

**My grandmother:** I had studied English. I had studied in the school, but I hadn't used it at all. So, somehow, I just squeezed out to tell I wanted to go to West Germany. But the Russian got so mad and started screaming, "What you are doing on the road here?! This is not for you. You have to go back to Estonia!! You shouldn't go at all! You should be arrested and taken back to Estonia!!" But the American was nice. And he didn't say anything. "Just go." So, he let us through.

My grandmother spoke in English, hoping the Russian would not recognize that they were Estonian, but he did anyway. The Russian soldier was standing at the checkpoint, making sure that any "Soviet citizens" were sent back. The Russian soldier was at the checkpoint for that purpose specifically—to ensure that people like my grandmother (and my mother and the whole group) would be stopped and sent back to Estonia or, more likely, be deported to Siberia where they would be imprisoned or killed. The American soldier was supposed to defer to the Russian soldier, in accordance with the secret agreement the U.S. had signed with the Soviet. Now, technically, Estonia and the other Baltic states were in a category that the U.S. had not agreed to send back. But there was so much chaos surrounding the repatriation process, the Soviet representatives were so aggressive about their claims over "their citizens," and the Allies were very deferential to the Soviets. So, I find it easy to imagine the American soldier turning her and the group over to the very agitated and insistent Russian soldier for repatriation. Did he let her pass because he was clear on the distinction that they legitimately were not supposed to be sent



back, or because he had mercy on her, the children and the other women? I don't know. But at that moment, that American soldier, in his *disobedience*, saved their lives.

I wonder if my grandmother understood what was happening and if that is why she spoke in English? But she didn't ever explain that story in a way that made me think that the fate of our family was determined by that American soldier letting her pass. Although maybe her journey held so many life-or-death moments that she didn't distinguish that one from the rest? In any case, reading Dismukes' report about this policy and its relevance to my family and then being able to find an oral history interview in which my grandmother speaks specifically to the consequences of that policy enabled me to experience the power of viewing history through the different lenses of historical analysis side by side with first-hand testimony.

## ii. body. my father

**On My Father's Shoulders [3:51]:** Listen to the clip [here](#).

**My father, Leevi Kiil:** My sister and I both absolutely remember that we were carried on our shoulders by our father. And my mother, who was pregnant, next to him, trying to make it to the boat, like wading our way through the water, the shallow waters of the shoreline to get to the boat, which couldn't come close to the shore because of the German patrol boats. But that I absolutely do remember. I do remember that dark, wading through the water. It was basically in the middle of the night when we left, because we had to hide from the Germans and, of course, the Russians also, who were bombing from the air. So, the lack of fear, I guess, has always amazed me that I never felt like I was insecure ... And we were caught in a wild storm on the Baltic Sea, where apparently the waves were the height of several-story buildings. But I don't remember any fear, total lack of fear, because I think we were so protected from, you know, by the adults that were doing that crossing themselves. And they were going through a horrible time because not only was the storm horrible, but our mother was pregnant and about to give birth. There were nine of us in our family, and there were probably at least 10 other people that were with us. Probably about 20 people in that little fishing boat all together. So, the men and women I guess that could help were bailing water out from the boat, because so much water had gotten into the boat. And then at some point the motor stopped, and we were just stopped in the stormy sea. And we found out later, many years later that one of the crew members had actually tried to heat some water on the engine for my mother in case she gave birth. And because of how much the boat was moving, the water spilled over the engine, and the motor went out. So, they worked on getting the motor restarted and bailing the water out of the boat. And, of course, there were several young children that were experiencing all of this, but from our standpoint we didn't have any fear about it, at least that we know about ...

**Me:** So, you actually remember being in the dark, wading through the water?



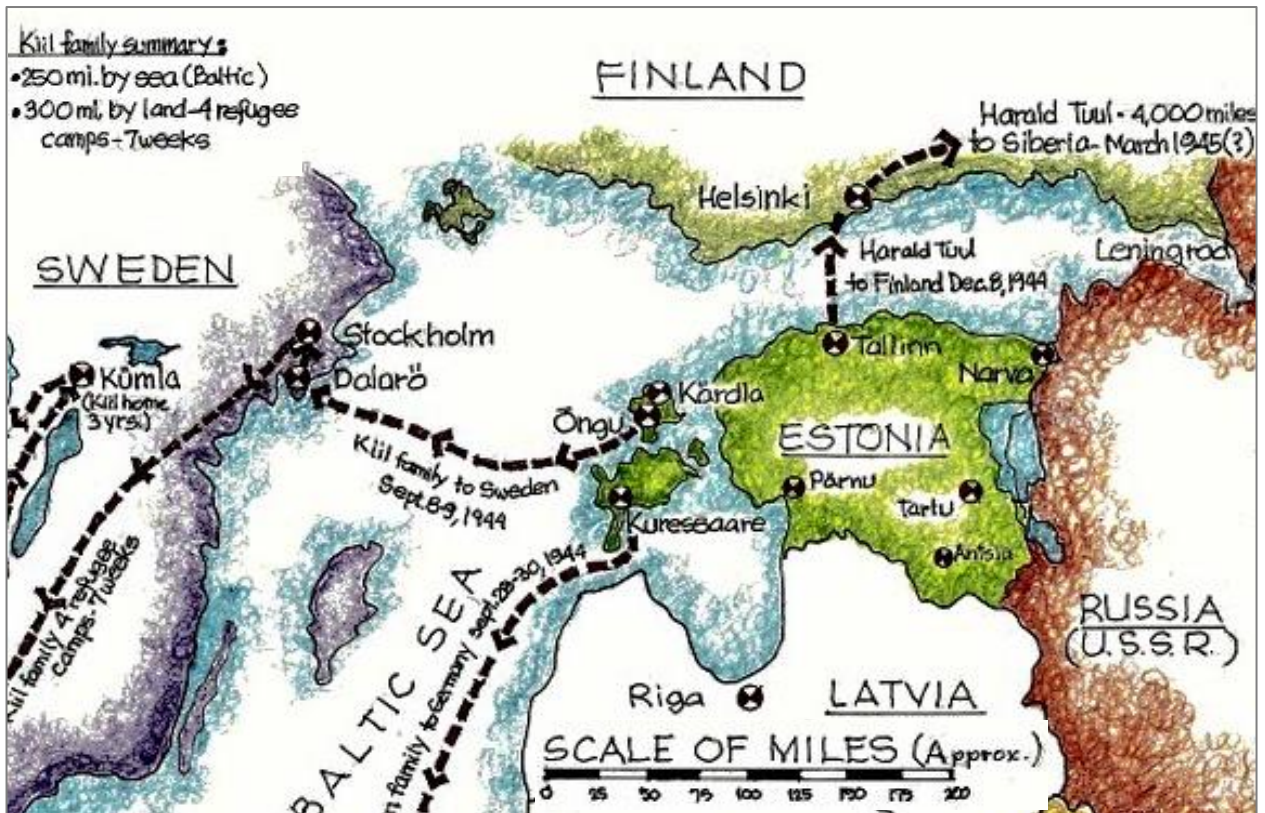
My father Leevi (left), his baby brother Toivo, and his sister Eha with their Aunt Alice in Sweden a few months after their escape.

**My father:** Yes.

**Me:** And so, you were three years old?

**My father:** I was four, almost four. I would be four in a month in October. This was September. My sister was already four, five by that time ... We kind of understood what we were doing. But, you know, how much does a child of four understand, you know, that we're leaving our homeland? We, all of us, my parents included, felt that this was all very temporary. And, you know, we were just going for a short trip to Sweden, and that we would soon be back. Because the hope of the adults was always America was winning the war and they would make everything right afterwards. And we would have our homeland back. And, but of course, it didn't turn out that way.

### Kiil Family Escape Route: Öngu to Sweden via boat (September 8–9, 1944)



.....

Unlike my parents, I was born in the U.S., but I grew up worrying about everything. To this day, I have vivid nightmares about threats to my physical safety or of panicked flight from dangerous situations. If I had grown up today, I would likely have been labeled an “anxious kid.” I just knew that I never felt quite comfortable in my skin, never felt like I quite fit in anywhere, very rarely felt at ease among friends or strangers.

I spent most of my 20s and 30s reading self-help and health books, because I never felt fully well. To deal with my struggles with weight, I ran marathons. To deal with my depression, I went to therapists. I tried all sorts of holistic practitioners: reiki masters, iridologists, yogis, herbalists. Physical balance and health just eluded me. I was finally diagnosed with thyroid issues after years of going to doctors for various problems. But even pinpointing that issue didn’t seem turn things around.

On top of the physical issues, which started popping up around puberty, I was always a sensitive kid – my family might say very emotional. I just knew I was very aware and in tune with everyone’s feelings and emotions. And I suspect that when I was a child, those feelings felt magnified. I am the middle child, and I think it’s pretty typical of middle children to be the peacemaker in the home. My older sister rebelled, so I tried not to cause problems as a teen. I got along with both of my siblings, while they fought each other. If anyone was arguing, including my parents, I inserted myself as mediator.

My father and I were always close. We have similar personalities – we are both quiet, serious, and have a tendency to worry – and we share interests like soccer and jogging. My father was also a middle child, so he tried to remember how that could make one feel invisible at times. The one area where I, in my youthful, middle-child-mediating arrogance thought my father and I were different was in our temper – in that I thought he had one but that I, the peacekeeper, didn’t.

When I was very young, it upset me when my father lost his temper. Arguments between my parents were usually about money and they usually took place after we kids had gone to bed, so I’m sure my parents thought we couldn’t hear them. I’m not sure if my siblings remember, but I was supersensitive, so they’d upset me. I’d sit at the top of the stairs and listen. My dad would get angry, my mom would get upset and not talk for a few days. I’d vow never to get angry like that.

Fast forward to several years into my marriage, a demanding job, sick baby, and suddenly *I* was the one with the hair-trigger temper. No matter what I did – yoga, dietary changes, marathon running – I still struggled to feel consistently well and calm in my body. I mentioned earlier that my daughter moved past her twos but she retained her *terribles*, so I realized the tendency toward tantrums had been passed down to her, too. From that point on, my decades-long quest to understand *my* body extended to her as well. I had wondered before about myself, but now I began to wonder with her in mind: What was this pattern and other patterns I was seeing in her, in me, and in our family, and where did it, where did they originate?

During the months and years preceding the story my father tells above, the one where his family finally escapes to Sweden, his family members were living under extraordinarily difficult circumstances, like all Estonians were. His father, my paternal grandfather, Evald Kiil, was a

minister. He was forced into hiding on two separate occasions. The first time, in 1941, he hid in the baptismal font in a fellow clergyman's church to evade joining the Russian Army.

The second time my grandfather had to hide was in 1944, right before the family's escape to Sweden. My grandfather was a Pentecostal minister. Because the Pentecostal church was opposed to Hitler, it was too dangerous for the family to live in the church. They moved out of the church to a nearby farmhouse temporarily. One day, my grandfather was scouting a secret pick-up point for refugees. He realized the location had been compromised, so he fled before he was caught. He'd arrived at the location by bike but left on foot to appear less suspicious. Unfortunately, he forgot that his briefcase, which contained his Bible, family photos, and identification, was on the bicycle. So, when the Nazis soldiers found the bike during the raid, they found his identification papers and knew exactly who he was, who his family was, and that he was planning to flee. They went to find him. He hid from the Nazi soldiers underneath the floorboards of the farmhouse where the family was staying.

**Hiding Under the Floorboards [0:30]:** Listen to the clip [here](#).

**My father:** While we were waiting, my father and Rev. Laur were hiding under the floorboards of the farmhouse where we were staying. They had dug out, taken out the floorboards, dug out a little hiding place for themselves, and then put the floorboards back, so that when the Germans came around to search the farmhouse they wouldn't be found.

My grandfather hid under those floorboards for about two weeks until the family was able to escape. While my grandfather hid, my father, my aunt, and my grandmother had to pretend to live a normal life, knowing my grandfather was hiding directly underneath them whenever anyone came looking for him. My father was three years old (almost four); his sister was five. How much did they understand?

This past summer, August 2022, my family drove with my father out to Õngu, the point on Hiiumaa Island where he and his family walked out into the water to wait for the boat to pick them up in September 1944. My father stood out there on a beautiful, clear evening and described what he remembered.

**Remembering Õngu, Site of Escape [1:04]:** View the clip [here](#).

**Me:** So, being here, do you actually remember that night, coming down to the water?

**My father:** I remember exactly what we see here. There was this kind of marshy area, and we walked into the water on my father's shoulders.

**My daughter, Sofia:** Did you guys take anything with you?

**My father:** The only thing we took were – my father had a briefcase where he had his Bible, and maybe a couple of bags of clothing. But we virtually left everything.





My father, Leevi, and his sister, Eha, visiting the pick-up point, Õngu, in 1994, 50 years after their escape.

## Reflections on (No) Fear and the Body

I find it so interesting that my parents' interviews are filled with statements like: "I don't remember feeling afraid," "I don't think I ever felt danger," "I always felt safe." Both my parents lived through the war, and both were children at the time. Both families fled Estonia in September 1944 in equally harrowing circumstances. Both lived in displaced persons (DP) camps / refugee camps for years. Both say they don't remember feeling afraid while their families were fleeing or while they lived in the camps.

**I Don't Remember Ever Being Afraid [3:31]:** Listen to the clip, compiled from several interviews, [here](#).

**My mother, Mall Kiil:** The interesting thing, I think, is that I always felt safe. I don't think I ever felt danger.

**My father, Leevi Kiil:** What I do remember is that I did not, I was not afraid. You know you know, throughout the voyage, I don't remember any kind of fear. And I think that's pretty amazing. But I think we felt, my sister and I both felt very protected by our parents. So, I don't remember ever being fearful, when I was with them, even through the difficult voyage and, you know, I would have assumed, though, if I had really been afraid, you know, I would have remembered something to that effect. But unless, of course, I just shut that out of my memory bank. But that's not something I was feeling at all – fear.

**My mother:** I don't remember ever being afraid.

**My father:** What I also remember is not being afraid. And I think during that whole trip, even, you know, people say that if you, if you're in trauma, you kind of suppress the memories. Maybe I did that. Maybe my sister and I both did that. But I don't remember ever being afraid and that, I think that has, that's a credit to how our parents protected us from physical harm during that time. I never felt like, "I don't want to be in the water," or, "I hate this." You know, I had no feelings of insecurity or fear. I just don't remember that. Again, maybe it was all suppressed.

**My mother:** I have a very vivid dream that has recurred from these days at this particular camp. I think it explains the war situation, but also my feeling safe. I haven't had it lately, but I had it frequently when I was a younger woman. I was a child walking along the street in the camp. And there was a particular street that had kind of an elevated grassy area next to it. And I think I was on the sidewalk. But at some point, I was walking along and became aware of the fact there was a car behind me that was kind of out of control. And I ran up on this on this grassy incline, and the car actually followed me up and hit me. But I woke up. None of this created any fear, even in my dream. It just was something that happened. The next image in my dream is of me kind of lying in the wreckage, with part of the fender kind of under my head as a pillow. And it was almost as though the car was protective around me. My interpretation of the dream is that there was chaos and war and real pain and distress going on around me all the time. But that somehow, I felt safe, within all of that craziness.

I believe my parents don't *remember* feeling fear. I don't think any of us is certain that means they did *not feel* fear at the time. I am not a psychologist or psychiatrist. I did not experience what they experienced. But I just cannot help but wonder: What does a body have to do to keep the fear a small child must inevitably experience in a situation like that from living inside their brain for the rest of their life? And if the child *did* feel fear at the time the events took place, where would that fear have had to go for them not to remember it?

When I consider this idea of fear (or not) in the mind of an *almost* four-year-old in this type of situation, I use my imagination to fill in details of that night based on the many interviews I've conducted with my father, the stories I've heard throughout my life, and the family members I know, combined with the many truths that live deep within my body. I try to imagine what it might have been like for little booted feet to step in cold muddy tracks in the dark, or for small, shivering hands to reach up and grasp for the comfort of larger ones.

This is how I imagine those initial moments might have happened.

.....

September 8, 1944.

Leevi's mother woke him and his sister Eha up in the middle of the night. It was dark outside. Everything was packed, so once the kids were awake, the family left the house within minutes and headed down to the shoreline with their bundles. No one spoke.

He should have been sleepy, but his body was buzzing with energy.

The moon wasn't full, but it was bright, so it lit the walk – what felt to his small legs like a miles-long walk – down the long path, through the marsh, and then into the water.

He waded out as far as he could go and then his father hoisted him and Eha up onto his shoulders. Leevi's legs dangled in the water over Isa's right shoulder. Eha, was perched on Isa's left shoulder. His mother held tight to Isa's left arm, dragging a large canvas bag behind her with the other arm as they waded farther out into the dark water. Aunt Alice, mother's younger sister who wanted to travel with them, was making her way through the water just a few feet behind them.

Leevi's eyes had already adjusted to the darkness, so he could see the fishing boat approaching. The moon reflected in the surf. He looked around and saw other people in the water moving toward the boat, only their heads and shoulders visible above the water line. He saw a few other children on their parents' shoulders, just like him.

Everyone was silent. The boat was silent, too.

He turned to look at Eha. She stared at him but said nothing. They often communicated without words. Since they were close in age, they had developed their own shorthand. This time he knew not to speak – that it was too dangerous. Glancing down, he realized Eha was squeezing his hand. Tightly. He hadn't even



felt it until he'd looked down. He was surprised, because it seemed like his hand wasn't even attached to his body.

His parents kept walking out deeper, slowly, step by step, side by side, arm in arm, as far as they could just until they could stand with only their shoulders and heads above water. Then they waited.

Leevi and Eha called their mother *Ema*, and their father *Isa*. Ema was quiet, still, watching. She looked up at the children, scanning their faces. Then, Ema and Isa looked at each other for a moment but said nothing. They faced forward again and watched the scene unfold, transfixed.

The boat drifted silently.

Closer, closer, closer.

It didn't take long for the boat to reach them. When it was close enough, Isa lifted Leevi up over the side of the boat first – he was the youngest and couldn't swim. Once he was inside the boat, he watched as Isa lifted Eha over.

Last night, Leevi heard Eha tell Isa to put him in the boat first, because she was older and could swim. Leevi pretended to be sleeping but he could hear every word, and it made him mad. He was almost four years old, and she was only one year older. Leevi didn't like that Eha could swim, and he couldn't. She always got to do things first, and she was so bossy. He wished he was the oldest, so he could tell his parents to put her in first.

After Eha was in the boat, the men helped Ema onboard. Since the baby was coming soon, they were trying to be extra gentle. Everyone was trying to be quiet, too. Aunt Alice climbed on next, and then Isa.

As he sat on the floor waiting for everyone to get settled, he wondered why he wasn't cold. He watched as one by one, people climbed on board, silently. They were all fully clothed with coats and hats – and fully soaked through. He still felt the buzzing in his body.

Leevi thought about how scary the last two weeks had been and how glad he was that Isa was with the family again. Isa had been hiding for the past two weeks under the floorboards of the house they'd been staying in. The soldiers came two days ago, banging on the door so loudly until Ema opened the door to let them in to search. It scared him and Eha. They stayed in the corner of the kitchen out of the way. Ema told them to say a prayer that Isa would be safe – silently, so the soldiers wouldn't notice. Afterward, when they knew it was safe for him to come out, Isa told him and Eha that the soldiers would find him eventually. So, if they wanted to stay together as a family, they had to leave.

Leevi was starting to feel cold, sleepy, and nervous, so he moved in closer to Ema, but when he looked up at her face, she looked strange, kind of greenish. She smiled a little and squeezed him tight. He saw Isa go over to the boat's captain to try to help him. Aunt Alice came and sat down on his other side, in between him and Eha, and quietly sang lullabies and told them stories. Everyone else on the boat talked quietly while the captain got the boat out to sea.

After a little while, Ema slowly, carefully stood up, taking time to balance herself, then walked over to Isa and whispered something in his ear. Isa put his arm around her, walked her back over to where they were all sitting, and helped her down to the ground. He put the bundles around her like pillows to make her more comfortable. He took off his coat and laid it on top of her.

Turning to Leevi and Eha, he said, “Children, the baby is coming soon, so Ema needs to rest. Will you please be her guardian angels and keep her safe and comfortable while I help the men with the boat? The sooner we get to Sweden, the sooner your baby brother or baby sister can join us. OK?”

Leevi and Eha nodded. Leevi straightened up. His father needed his help. So, he needed to be brave. Ema and the baby needed him. And Isa would need his help on the journey.

.....

My father’s family landed in Sweden after a difficult, stormy, turbulent 29-hour Baltic Sea crossing during which the boat’s engine died. My grandmother went into labor during the crossing, so she was immediately removed from the family and rushed to the hospital, where she gave birth to my uncle Toivo. The name Toivo means *hope* in Finnish. My grandmother and baby Toivo didn’t see the others for seven weeks. During those seven weeks, the rest of the family was bounced among four different refugee camps.

I try to imagine how this might have felt to a child: Not only the nighttime escape. Not only the 29-hour boat trip on stormy seas, high waves, during which the boat’s engine died. Not only the excitement of being rescued by a Swedish Red Cross ship! But then as soon as the boat lands, your mother is whisked away, and you don’t see her for seven weeks. You are in a strange country, moved to four different refugee camps. You are trying to be brave because it’s just you, your father, and your sister for a while. You see your father is worried and you don’t want to worry him more – you are old enough to understand that. So, where do you put your fear? Where does it go in your body?

In contrast to my parents, I grew up in peacetime with seemingly nothing to stand in the way of my happiness and growth. So, what would explain my angst? I kept thinking about the similarities between me and my father and these patterns, especially as I also considered the many physical struggles my father had been wrestling with the past couple decades, including with unidentified autoimmune issues.

Around the time I heard the interview with Dr. Yehuda about epigenetics, my internist tested me for a genetic mutation, which it turns out I have one marker for. It affects my body’s ability to metabolize stress. It can also lead to depression or anxiety if left untreated. (Fortunately, it is easily treated with specific vitamins.) I asked my daughter’s pediatrician to test her for this genetic mutation, wondering if her body was having difficulty “metabolizing stress,” resulting in these tantrums. He thought I was crazy asking for that test, but he obliged. When the results came back, he was surprised that she had not one but two of the markers for that genetic mutation. I couldn’t help but wonder about genetic mutations in the context of the interview I’d heard with Dr. Yehuda, namely trauma’s ability to change the expression of DNA across generations.

**Echoes of My Grandfather in Me [1:57]:** Listen to the clip [here](#).

**Me describing what happens to me when my body experiences high levels of stress:** It's just a complete sense of overwhelm, physically, and my brain doesn't work. Like, I can't, I can't quite think straight. Something happened this morning, and I was trying to figure things out. I was trying to get on the road, so I could get to class on time. So, I could like see the clock, ticking by. And I had to figure this thing out. And I couldn't think of where the thing was that I needed to do. [Laughing] I think I even started hyperventilating. And my daughter came to me to try to help me sort out what the problem was. Very kindly, I said it, but I was "I just" -- she could tell I was upset -- "I just need you to go downstairs, I need to figure something out and I just need to think for a minute, I can't figure this out." I was really just trying to calm my body down. So, I have all these things that I do to calm myself down.

**Me describing my grandfather:** My grandfather was a very emotional man. Very loving, very kind, very gregarious. Every time, we would always have to play our instruments in church, and he would cry. And when he would preach, he would often cry -- he was a very emotive person. But my dad one time said that he actually had a weekly radio show, he had a whole studio in his basement. And that sometimes he would disappear and go into that room, and no one would bother him when he was in there. I guess if he was very upset or whatever was happening, that's where he would go.

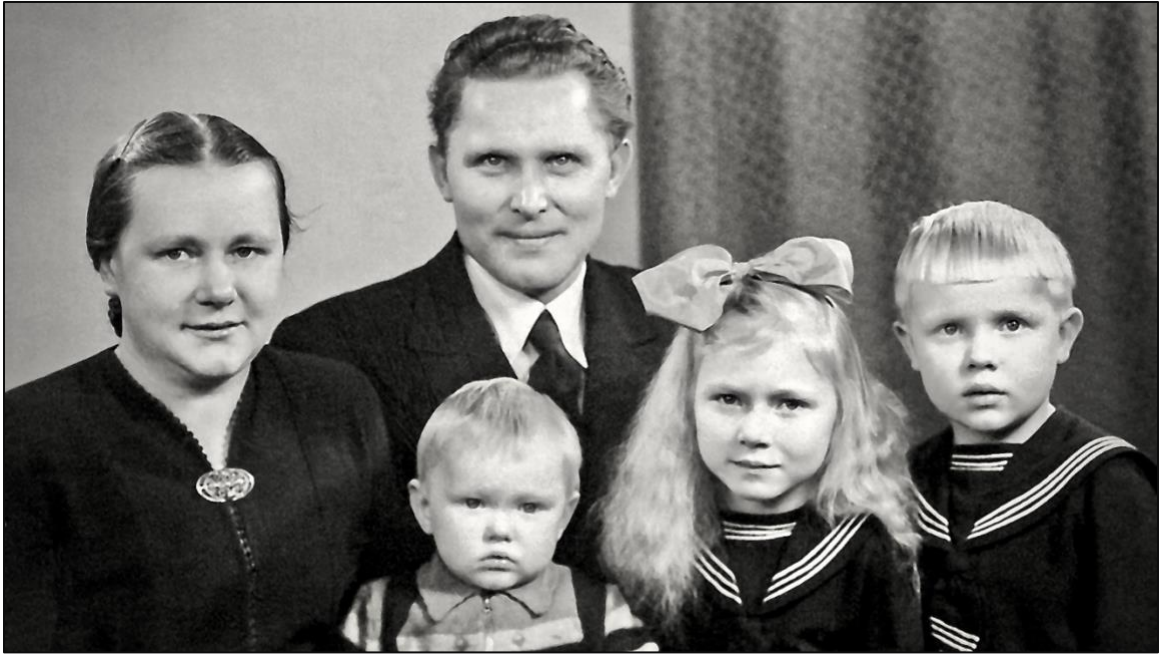
I said earlier I'm not a psychiatrist. I'm also not a scientist, but I can wonder if the time my dad's father spent hiding from the Russian Army in the church baptismal font translated into an inability to manage high levels of stress resulting in meltdowns that cascaded down through his children to his grandchildren and great-grandchildren? I can understand the scars of war that rip through dimensions of time and space.

.....

During our brief visit to the Island of Hiiumaa, where my father was born, I sat and enjoyed the serenity of the early morning sounds. I imagined what it might be like to be from this place, for this island landscape to be part of my bones. Then, I imagined what it might be like to be taken from the beauty of this place as a child and what that might do to one's sense of well-being.

I offer the following soundscape as a gift – for my father, my aunt, my uncle's daughters and their kids, my siblings, myself, my daughter, my nieces and nephews. Perhaps listening to it (just pieces of it here and there, or occasionally in its entirety as a meditation) might restore to us a tiny piece of what was lost that early morning almost 80 years ago when my father and his family waded out into the darkness.

**Rainy Morning Soundscape in My Father's Childhood Hometown (Kärdla, Hiiumaa Island, Estonia), July 8, 2022 [5:00]:** Listen to the clip [here](#).



My father's family in Sweden, a couple years after their arrival. My grandmother, Meta Kiil; my grandfather, Evald Kiil; and kids from left to right: Toivo, Eha, Leevi (my father)



My father's family was sponsored to come to New York in June 1948, so my grandfather could pastor an Estonian church in Harlem. My father, Leevi, is front row, left, then Eha and Toivo.

### iii. heart. my grandmother

What is clear is that when there is silence and absence, there is a repetition of the past in the present, and the victim, as well as future generations, are burdened. Grief and intolerable pain cannot be hidden, not from the victim nor from the generations that follow.

— Judith Alpert, PhD.<sup>10</sup>

**Wägele [5:30]:** Watch the video [here](#).

**My mother:** There was always something going on in the house between all of the five women who lived together. It was pretty volatile a lot of the times. Just the personalities were volatile, not that it was very negative. But I think they were just loud and felt safe, maybe, expressing their differences of opinion.

**My grandmother:** You know what wägele is?

*A wägele is a wagon, with a crossbar for two people to pull. It is approximately 4 ft. long by 3 ft. wide, with metal wheels. Big enough for some bundles (or all your worldly possessions), and even a baby. In this story, the baby is my mother, Mall. In September 1944, the women in my mother's family fled Estonia after Stalin's second invasion. My grandmother (age 26) and my great-grandmother (age 50) pulled the wägele for 5 weeks (300 km) on foot.*

**My grandmother:** Well, I didn't know about really my father's and my brother's fate, what happened when we left.

*Her brother, Endel, and father, Karl, had both been forcibly disappeared three years earlier, on June 1, 1941, during Stalin's first occupation of Estonia.*

**My grandmother:** But in my heart, I felt that my father and my brother are dead, but Harald was alive.

*My grandfather, Harald, was an army physician with his unit when the Red Army invaded. In the chaos that ensued, he was unable to catch up with his family.*

**My grandmother:** I didn't know whether I was doing the right thing or not. And physically, I was exhausted. I felt a great responsibility to take care of Mall, Mother, Lüüdi, and Nanni. I told Nanni not to come [with] us. She said, "I'm coming with you no matter what. Whatever happens to you." So, she was an old lady, but she was a tough one. And I appreciated so much that she stayed with me.

We got the wagon. We again loaded all my little bundles, [they] were getting smaller and smaller. But we had still some, and Mall was on top of them. But now the scenario was different. There was part of Allies area. And they had patrols on the road, and they were checking the roads. And at first, they didn't let us on the road.

**Me:** So, who was checking the roads? The Allies?

**My grandmother:** Allies. I didn't know if it was American or British one, I don't know. Anyway, and finally he said, "Go, I don't see you."

I said, "Well, I'm not alone. I have five people and I have a wagon."

"Oh, no no. Forget about it." And then he said, "Well, come back after midnight when the checkpoint point has been through already."

So, first time he sent us back again. But then late midnight, after midnight, he was standing there, and he didn't look at us, we didn't look at him, we just kept going. And he let us through. And it was a full moon night. And deep forest, both sides I'm [sure] were full of refugees and prisoners who had escaped or deserters. We were with a wagon, which made such a noise you could hear a mile away, because the iron wheels. And the full moon shining on us. Nobody touched us. And when we got to the next checkpoint, I told everybody, "Don't even look at him. We just go straight like we have all the right to go." And we just went. We didn't even look at him. He didn't stop us.

**Me:** Do you remember ever processing any of that?

**My mother:** I don't.

**Me:** It just wasn't really discussed?

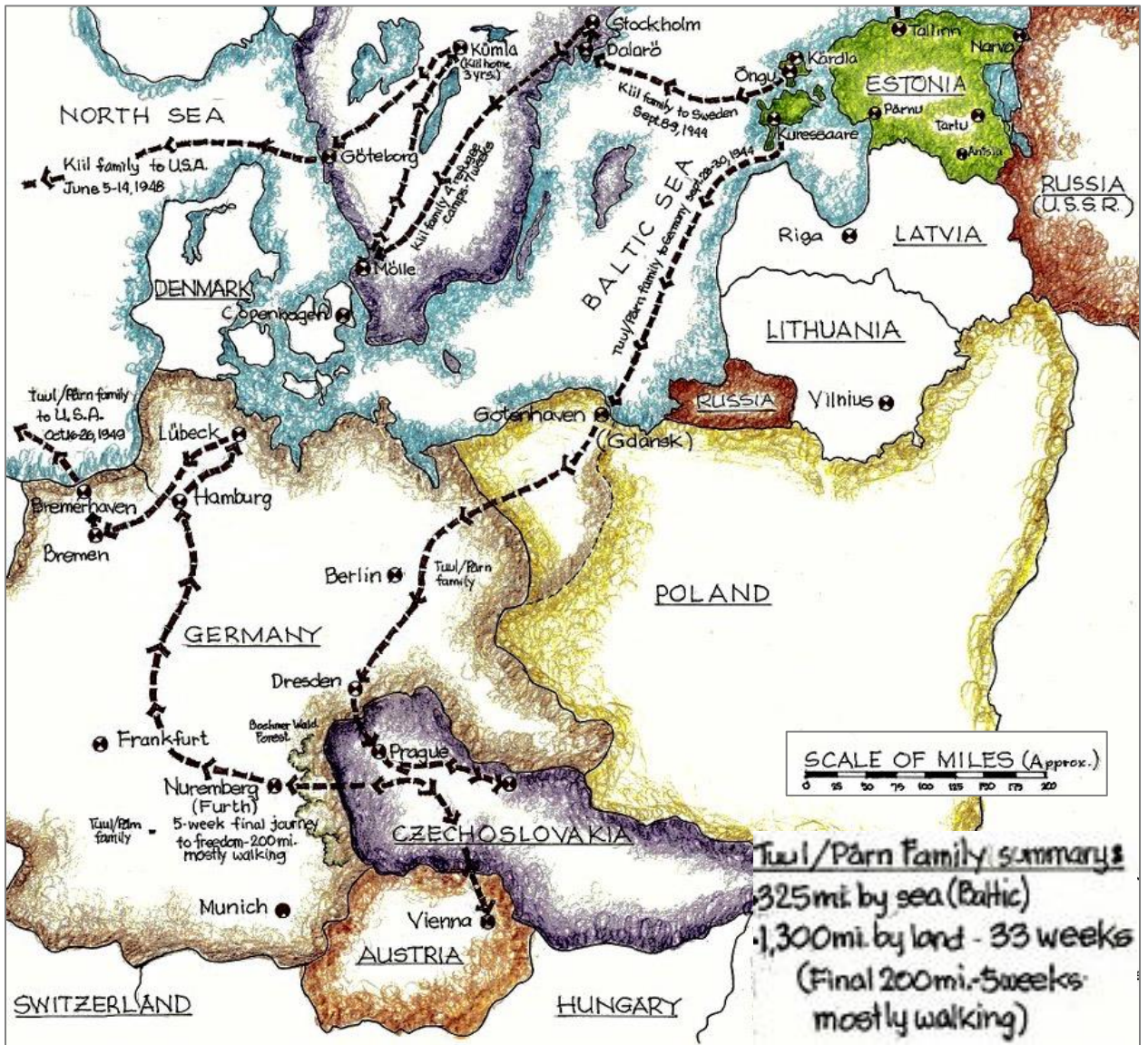
**My mother:** It wasn't well, it wasn't discussed.

**Me:** Did mom ever ask you questions about it? Like as she was growing up, did she ever – ?

**My grandmother:** Well, no, no. She never asked me about it. Neither did my mother. My mother never – we never discussed it. I don't think I ever discussed the Harald problem with her. Uh, it was too hurtful, too painful to talk about it. So, I was quiet about it, and carried it all within me all these years. That's all I can say.



### Tuul/Pärn Family Escape Route: through Europe to Germany via boat, train, and on foot (September 20, 1944)



## silences about men

I watch and read stories of husbands, brothers, and fathers parting with their wives, mothers, girlfriends, sisters, children, and babies at the Ukrainian border so they can go back to defend their country. I experience déjà vu of a life I didn't live myself but might as well have. I feel a pit in my stomach as I flash forward in my imagination two or three generations. Will that baby's daughter or granddaughter, once she's grown up, struggle to find answers to the questions I've had most of my life? Will she feel like she's trying to force together puzzle pieces that don't quite fit?

Seventy-eight years ago, my grandfather left my mother and grandmother at the train station to go back to the front line to fight to save his country. They never saw him again. My grandmother's father and brother had already been lost to the war, so after my grandfather boarded that train, all of her men were gone.

Five women, spanning multiple generations, fled Estonia during World War II and lived together in different configurations over the next years and decades without men. During those decades, they never spoke about the missing men.

I believe I inherited, but didn't understand, these deep soul gashes – these silences about men who were loved but lost. And that I played out these patterns in my life.

**Soul Gashes [2:08]:** Listen to the clip [here](#).

When I was younger, I was shy and extremely guarded emotionally. Deep within my bones, maybe because of what my family had experienced during the war, my body reacted with silence in certain situations. Many situations.

It wasn't until my senior year of high school that I was able to open up enough to make two best friends. And romantic relationships? Well, that would have required being able to actually *speak* to a person or at least not run in the *other direction* from them. So, that took quite a bit longer still. At the time, I felt there must be something wrong with me that would explain why no one was interested in me.

So, when a 25-year-old psychologist asked me out spring semester of my senior year of college, I figured I'd better take a chance and make something happen. One evening, after we'd been on several dates, we were sitting on my couch talking and listening to music. He interrupted himself suddenly and blurted out, "Oh, I know what it is! You were raped!"

He sounded oddly excited and pleased with himself, like he had *finally* come up with a solution to a problem he'd been working on for a while.

He didn't ask if I'd been raped. He *stated* that I had been.

I had not been.

Wait. Had I?



This guy was a professional psychologist. He at least seemed to be confirming for me that there was something wrong with me, since I obviously could not relate to men in a normal way. Even worse, a small part of me wondered if what he'd said was true.

Of course, being completely shut down emotionally. I didn't express any of this to him. I simply avoided his calls, didn't answer the door when he dropped by, and tried to put the incident behind me. I never saw him again. I didn't tell even my closest friends at the time what he'd said.

In fact, I've never told anyone about this until now. I did wonder, though, over the years, decades, if there was any truth to it. If something had happened. And I just could not remember.

My mother's parents were both medical doctors. On September 18, 1944, my grandfather, Harald Tuul boarded a train eastward to return to his army unit where he was the only medical doctor. But the front line was disintegrating in the face of the advancing Russian Army. My grandmother, Aino Tuul, fled westward to escape the Russian advance. She had already experienced the brutality of the first Russian occupation in 1941, when her father and brother were forcibly disappeared, so she would not risk her daughter's safety by staying in the capital city.

At 26 years old, separated from her husband, my grandmother was the default leader of the group of five women and children who fled together. They spent months traveling through Europe, and several years housed in various DP camps. Both my grandmother and my great-grandmother, Alvine Pärn, were able to work in the camps, leveraging their medical degrees and experience. During this time, my grandmother frantically searched through Red Cross records trying to figure out what happened to Harald.

Harald hadn't ever reached his army unit as he had hoped, because the front line disintegrated before he got there. He went into hiding for several months. In December 1944, he and a few other men repaired a fishing boat and escaped to Finland. Still trying to find his family, Harald turned himself in to the Finnish authorities. The Finnish authorities, not knowing what to do with him (because the Finnish government had just signed a peace treaty with the Soviets to turn over any Estonians who fled), put him in jail. After several months in jail, they moved him to an internment camp. Ultimately, the Finnish authorities capitulated to the Russians, who sent Harald to a concentration camp in Siberia.

While my grandmother was still in the DP camps in Germany, a friend sent her a clipping from a Swedish newspaper of a serial called "A Soldier's Story" that sounded like Harald. Harald had started a diary the moment he left my grandmother at the train station on September 18, 1944. In the diary, he chronicled his physical and emotional journey up until he was to be moved from the Finnish internment camp. He'd given the diary to a nurse in the internment camp and had asked her to pass it to his friends in Sweden. We don't know how the diary ended up at the Swedish newspaper instead. With my grandmother's permission, her friend was able to take possession of the diary and send it to my grandmother in the DP camp. My grandmother held onto the diary for 70 years and translated it into English.

The women in my mother's family were sponsored to come to the United States in 1949 after living in the DP camps for approximately five years. They had finally eluded the Soviet regime. They lived with other refugee families until they could afford their own place. My grandmother worked for several years to get re-licensed as a doctor.

**Memme Gets a Phone Call [2:25]:** Listen to the clip [here](#).

**My mother, Mall:** I mean, I still remember in Mahland Place when I think Memme got the phone call from somebody about where Harald was. She was, she slept in the other room. I slept with Nanni in the small room. And the phone had rung. It must have been a weekend, because she was still in bed. And I could see her breathing in a way that indicated that there was a lot of anxiety, and the news was distressing her. And I think that was when she found out more about where he was. So that would have been my being in seventh grade or eighth grade.

**Me:** So, news that he was what?

**My mother, Mall:** There was some news about him, maybe. I mean, you know, there was a gap of time when we didn't hear anything at all. And I'm not sure of who it was even that was calling her. I wonder--

**Me:** This would've been like '55, 1955, when you guys were first getting back in touch at all over there.

**My mother, Mall:** Yeah. Right.

**Me:** So, she got a call from somebody--

**My mother, Mall:** Yeah. And it was, she was very emotional on the phone, more listening, which is why I don't really know what was said, but I know it was about my father. But we didn't talk about that either, you know. Or not that I remember. Maybe I've repressed all of these things that were upsetting and --

**Me:** Well, I asked her specifically if you ever talked about it, and she said, "No, Mall never asked me."

**My mother, Mall:** In general, about my father, you mean or about the--

**Me:** Well, yeah, I asked if you all ever talked about any of these things, and she said no, and that you never asked her any questions.

**My mother, Mall:** But what did I even know to ask her?

**Me:** I don't know. I mean, of course. What would you know to ask? And you probably knew not to ask anything, and she didn't talk about it, so. No. So, I'm sure she didn't talk about it.

**My mother, Mall:** No. I mean, where do you start with something like that?

.....

My grandfather, unfortunately, was moved from the Finnish internment camp to prison in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) for a year. Then he was sent to a labor camp (gulag) in Siberia for eight years.

In 1959, Aino appealed to the U.S. government for Harald to be released from Siberia, to allow him to join his family in the United States. Harald's elderly parents in Estonia panicked, fearing retribution for themselves and Harald. As a result, Aino rescinded the application, cut off all contact with Harald and his family, and gave up on any chance of reunification. She never saw, spoke to, or heard from Harald again. Once he was released from prison, Harald remained in Siberia. He practiced medicine and occasionally visited his elderly parents in Estonia. He never returned to Estonia to live. Many years later, we found out that Harald had a son in Siberia. My mother's half-brother is a few years older than I am. Harald died in Siberia in 1985.

Despite the turmoil in her personal life, my grandmother had a very successful and fulfilling career in anesthesiology with wonderful colleagues. And in her 60s, she did remarry, to an Estonian widower. They traveled the world and lived peacefully together for 37 years until he passed away at age 97. She told me that during her marriage to her second husband, Ilmar, she didn't think about the war or about Harald. She put that chapter of her life away in a box and lived in peace.

About six months after Ilmar passed away, however, we found a box of letters among the belongings of Harald's brother, my mother's uncle Leo. My mother was Leo's heir since he didn't have any children of his own. In the box were letters Harald had written and intended for my grandmother and mother, to be sent through Leo. In order to send letters to the United States, Harald had to send them from Siberia (where he was) to his parents or aunt in Estonia; his parents would then forward the letters to Canada (to Leo); then Leo would send the letters on to the United States (to my grandmother or mother). For some reason, there were some letters in that box that Leo never sent to my grandmother or mother. Why? There was no explanation. My grandmother read and translated every piece of every letter in that box that pertained to Harald or her or my mother. Needless to say, it was very painful for her to read letters Harald had written to her that had been kept from her – letters Harald had written 70 years earlier to her, and that now she could neither respond to nor get closure from.

My grandmother and I spent innumerable hours and countless pots of tea discussing Harald, his motivations, his feelings (either expressed or more likely not, because everything had to be cryptic in these censored letters). At some point, my grandmother began telling me she had to tell me something but couldn't. It was too terrible. But that I'd find out after she died.

.....

**The Last Secret [6:14]:** Listen to the clip [here](#).

**Me:** On a spring afternoon when my grandmother was almost 101 years old, we went to the cemetery with my father and then to a local pub. She and I waited for my father outside of the restaurant while he parked the car. It was a cold, overcast afternoon.

My grandmother held on to my arm and we were about to walk up the steps to the front door when she said, "I have to tell you something." The gravity in her voice made my stomach drop. For months, she had been telling me, usually through tears, that there was something she wasn't telling me, and that she would never tell me, and that I would read in her diary after she passed away.

I stopped on the steps and turned toward her, trying to stay calm. "Harald raped me," she said quietly.

I was sure I had misheard her. "What?" I asked her, working hard to keep my voice calm. I looked behind me to see whether my father was approaching yet.

"Yeah," she said, and then added, "Do you believe me?"

A few weeks earlier, we had had a huge argument about the MeToo movement. My grandmother still really liked to have active, engaged discussions about current events. I don't remember how we got onto the topic that day, but she was very agitated and almost yelling, saying, "Do you think it's right that these women ruin these men's lives and reputations by accusing them so many years later?" "Yes," I said emphatically. I was very upset but tried to calmly express my feelings about men in power coercing young, naive women into believing that they want to help them with their careers and then taking advantage of them. She scoffed that day, saying the women knew what they were doing.

On the steps that cold gray afternoon. I responded, "Yes, I believe you." I wasn't sure I actually *meant* what I was saying. My brain was spinning. For the past few years, she and I had spent many hours discussing Harald and how, after everything, having re-lived many of her wartime memories and what she felt was his abandonment of her, she was still having trouble getting over "her first love." My father was coming toward us from the parking lot, so we couldn't continue our conversation.

But later that afternoon, when we got back to her apartment, I made some tea and we sat down on her couch. I was shaking, in a panic about what she was going to tell me and how I would handle it. She didn't notice, because she was trying to pull herself together. And then she told me. She began recounting a story she had told me many times about the beginning of their courtship.

One evening, Harald called her. He was at a party but wasn't enjoying it. He asked if he could come visit her instead. She told me she opened the door to let him in. Then her memory is blank. The next thing she remembers is being on the couch, lying down. There was blood. She watched him leave through the front door, without turning back to say anything to her.

Memme and Harald were colleagues and classmates, so they saw each other afterward. They never spoke about it. She didn't tell anyone. There was no one

she could tell. She wasn't close to her mother. She realized within a few weeks that she was pregnant. She told Harald. They quickly got married. "What else was she to do?" she said.

I thought about the photos I'd come to treasure of their war-time wedding and the stories she told me about their running off through the sniper-filled streets after curfew to have privacy on their wedding night. Were those all lies?

I was angry, but I wasn't sure at whom.

She continued before my thoughts could devolve completely.

Shortly after the wedding, she had a miscarriage. She was relieved and felt like God had taken that burden from her. "But you stayed with him?" I asked. They stayed together. They were married. That was not something to be undone in those days. And it was wartime. And they made a life. A few months into the marriage, my grandmother's aunt asked them why it was taking so long for them to have a baby. (My mother was born a year and a half after they were married.)

They were together just under three years, working as doctors, before the war heated up. He was deployed, and their worlds fell completely apart when my grandmother fled and Harald was left behind. By then, the rape was far in the rearview mirror. The rest of her life, her story, *their* story was about her trying to get the family back together.

My head could not wrap around this. I wanted so badly to defend him, to attribute this to her confusion. Could this be the beginnings of dementia or something else? Or could it have been a misunderstanding? Or maybe he was abused as a child? Or maybe he was shy and didn't handle the situation well? He had, in fact, suffered a major physical trauma a few months earlier when lost his right eye when he was caught in a sniper's crossfire. Maybe that had something to do with this?

I spent my adulthood looking out for women, supporting women, speaking up for women, especially for victims of rape and domestic violence. And now I was trying to figure out how she could be wrong about this, or how to justify what had happened, just so I could hold on to my fantasy about a man I never even knew? I feel sick just thinking about where my mind went that day. All those years I'd been telling her she could tell me anything. And when she finally got up the courage to tell me the worst, my first reaction was to disbelieve her.

So, I listened. I did not say much, except to tell her how sorry I was. I was confused and angry and sad. I couldn't imagine how she was feeling. Her courage astounds me still. How did she manage to say those words to her *granddaughter*?

My grandmother talked about how terrified she was to tell my mother, since she had always tried to speak respectfully about Harald to my mom. And truly, though I still cannot understand it, my grandmother loved my grandfather and admired him, and would have given anything to have been able to reunite with him. But with the uncovering of this truth, she was afraid my mother would hate her.

So, I told my mother for her. In the parking lot of a Starbucks. I talked; my mother listened. We cried. Her mind and emotions jumped immediately to where mine had initially gone. Her mother must be misremembering, and this is from so long ago, and her memory from that night is blank, so how could she know that he raped her? Since I had just taken that journey myself, I tried to walk through it with her. I don't know what my mother believes happened, and we can't ask Harald. But I have had to work through this by coming to an acceptance of the horrors of war, all of them. To an acknowledgment of the complexities of love and family and the mysterious human capacity to despise one side of a person but be able to love another. To compassion for my grandmother and for Harald. Love is incomprehensible.

.....

After my grandmother revealed this event to me that day on the restaurant steps, the incident from college with my psychologist “boyfriend” came back to me. This might sound strange to anyone who doesn't live in my body (so, everyone but me), but when my grandmother told me what Harald had done to her (someone he supposedly cared for at the time), I remembered this college story. Suddenly, that college guy's assessment that I behaved as though I had been raped finally made sense in a weird way.

For the years since his comment, I had been trying to remember if anything had happened to me, worried that one day I would wake up remembering the awful details. So, was my college boyfriend right? Was it possible I had been raped and didn't remember, like he said? Yes, it was possible. But was it also possible that this event between my grandmother and grandfather had echoed down through time to me? Was it possible that my behaviors and reactions were the result of trauma that my family – in this case, specifically my grandmother – experienced (e.g., war, rape) and passed down via epigenetics or my “emotional inheritance”<sup>11</sup> and/or patterns I subconsciously observed and emulated between women and the men they supposedly loved, or the feelings of women toward the men who supposedly loved them?

How is it possible, *if* it's possible, that this event could have echoed down through time to me? I have searched books and academic texts, listened to interviews and podcasts, attended lectures for almost 10 years. Recently, I discovered the work of Dr. Galit Atlas in the area of intergenerational trauma. According to Dr. Atlas, “we carry emotional material that belongs to our parents and grandparents, retaining losses of theirs that they never fully articulated. We feel these traumas even if we don't consciously know them. Old family secrets live inside us.”<sup>12</sup>

This is one of the clearest explanation I have found to date:

Unresolved traumas get handed down to children, and these hand-me-downs are too massive for them. It is confusing and scary. There are strong reactions to things that cannot be seen or understood. The child needs to know. At the same time, mother needs to not know. The mother does not fully own her own mind. That is what happens when there is dissociated trauma. It takes up space and leaves her less free to imagine, to delight, and to be open to what emerges in her life and in the life of her family. Dissociated affect and ideas may leave a parent more easily affected by triggers aroused by their child (Moldawsky Silber, 2012). Seligman (1999) noted that procedural and prereflective experiences that are located around physical and affective registers are susceptible to transfer.<sup>13</sup>

I mentioned the concept of embodiment earlier. In the interviews I've been conducting with my family and with others who lived this same experience during World War II, I have felt these stories and experienced them almost as if I had been there – though I wasn't. It feels like more than empathizing. Because I grew up hearing these stories and immersed in the languages, rituals, and foods to which my community clung in order to keep the connection to homeland alive, this history is a part of me, part of my body, for better or worse. The patterns I have seen repeating in my own life are a direct result of the experiences my parents and grandparents lived. I have only been able to make sense of them by listening to family and community members tell their stories.

**Relations [0:51]:** Listen to the link [here](#).

According to Nehiyawiwhtamawakan, Cree Teaching, Etymology, we inherit relationships and obligations from and to the generations behind, among, and before us, to life on this earth as we know it, and to our homelands. Our histories are infused in our daily lives – they are lived experiences. So it is that the memories of our forefathers and foremothers become our own. And we are burdened with the obligation to keep them alive ... just as cultural memories may be embedded in material artifacts, so too the memories of personal experiences leave permanent physical traces within our bodies ... We carry inside us the stories we are personally given, but it is also true that we carry memories that we can't remember being given, and when we hear the voices of elders long gone on a tape, the body and spirit responds as if we were actually there, as if they were speaking directly to us. The only explanation I can give is wahkotowin, *relations*.<sup>14</sup>

—Winona Wheeler

## iv. voice. my grandfather

**Harald's Diary [1:59]:** Watch the clip [here](#).

*September 18, 1944: Tallinn, Estonia. Harald started writing in this diary as soon as he said good-bye to my grandmother at the train station so he could return to his army unit. He never kept a diary before. This is a photo of the actual diary and the entry being read. He wrote the diary in Estonian, and my grandmother translated it into English.*

September 18th, 1944, in Tallinn, in the Baltic Railway station, where by wonderful fate, I could say farewell to my loved ones before the war situation becomes hopeless. The big nations have drawn Estonia into turmoil again. I still believe in the moral integrity of our people, and I am willing to give all of my strength and effort to help save the nation. That is the reason why I am taking off.

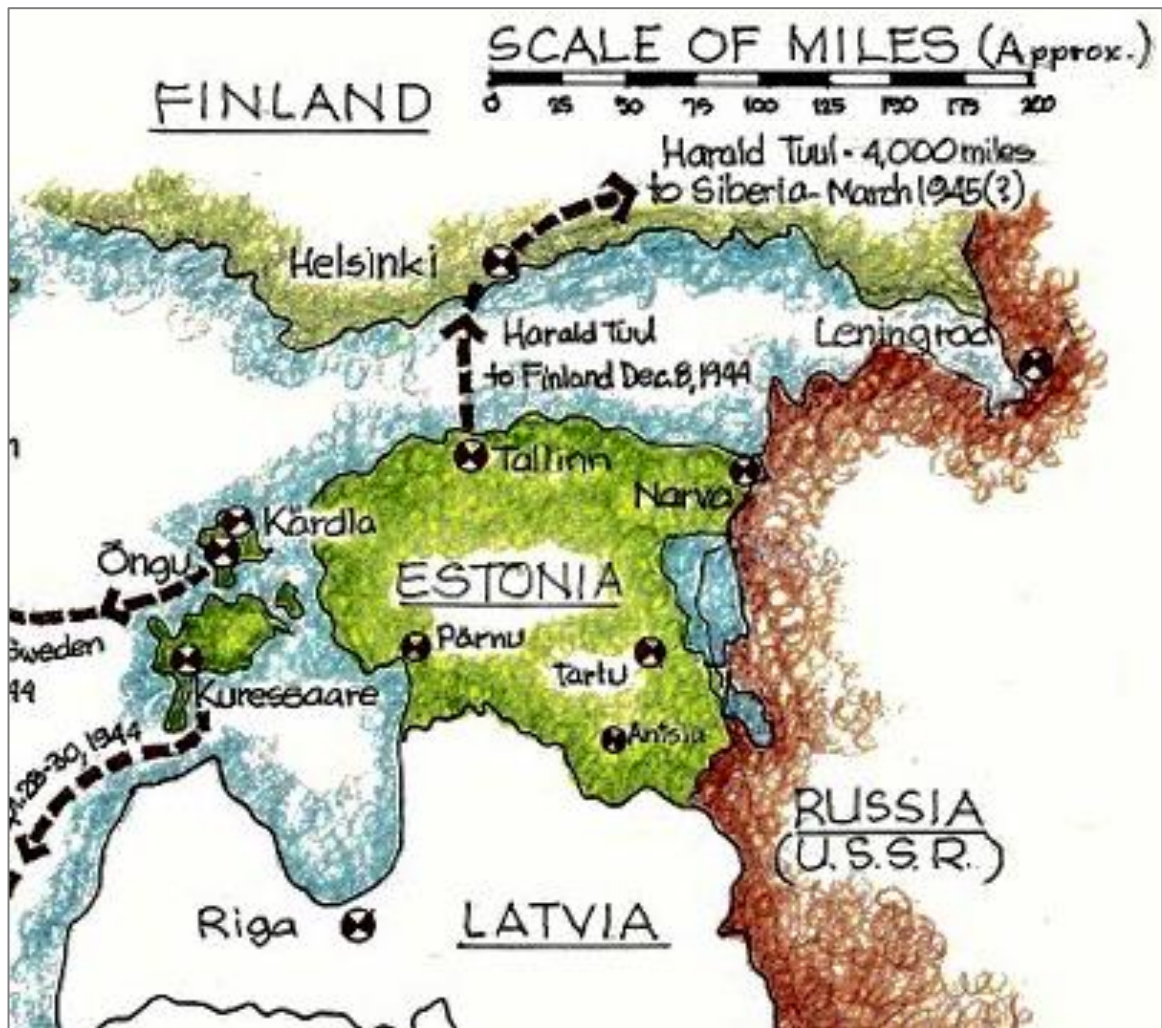
Dear Aino is not aware that our unit is in great danger. I do not believe that we can get out from that place. But I do not want to alarm her unnecessarily, because you never know what can happen. It is time to separate. The last kiss from Aino, grapes from Aino's mother, and hand clasps.

The train starts to move. I have a very heavy and unexplainable feeling inside. A premonition of some powerful explosion. And at the same time, curiosity about what is going to happen.

My family, which I have to leave behind, certainly deserves a better future than the one they have experienced up until now. I am very grateful to them that they did not ask me to abandon my unit and escape my duties. They know what is at stake. A few optimists are trying to save the nation at all costs.



- Harald Tuul Escape Route / Capture:
- Estonia to Finland via boat (December 7–8, 1944)
  - > Finnish prison/internment camp (6 months)
  - > St. Petersburg prison (1 year)
  - > Siberia labor camp (8 years)



The diary.

I'd heard about it. It was one of the few things I connected to Harald, my maternal grandfather. Since his name was rarely mentioned among our family, there wasn't much else for me to grasp onto. I'd seen just one or two photographs of him and heard just a few well-worn descriptions of him like *doctor*, *well-respected*, and *mediator*. At some point, I became aware that he had another family, so I must have concluded that was the reason we didn't talk about him. And then there was the diary he'd written that seemed to be of great interest and a bit mystical.

When I started helping my maternal grandmother with her memoir, she was in her 90s and I was in my 40s. So, in one of my first interviews with Memme in 2013, when she agreed to spend an entire hour talking about Harald, it was the first time in my life I felt able to ask about him freely. I can still remember how nervous and *jumping-out-of-my-seat-but-trying-so-hard-to-contain-my-joy-and-appear-calm-because-I-knew-how-hard-this-was-for-her* excited I was.

This one moment about the baby is my favorite because of how wistful my grandmother is and how easily she seems to slip into the delight of that memory about *his* delight with the baby, my mother as an infant. I've watched it dozens of times.

**Who's Got the Baby? [1:50]:** Watch the clip [here](#).

*August 6, 2013: New Jersey. Interview with my grandmother. She agreed ahead of time that we could spend this interview talking about my grandfather, Harald. We had never spoken in detail about him before.*

**Me:** So, today how would you feel about talking about Harald?

**My grandmother:** Well, this is more difficult subject to talk about than my brother and my father, because it's very deep inside of me. And in spite of all these years, I still have [him] in my heart. And certainly, I'm even glad that he passed away. I think it would have been much harder when he still would be alive.

*Since we never spoke about Harald, I'm surprised by the amount of warmth and love and ease she displays as she shares her memories of those early years with him during the war when my mother was a baby.*

**Me:** So, after the baby was born, you were all in Antsla?

**My grandmother:** Oh, we came back to Antsla by taxi. When we arrived to Antsla, then Harald, he just grabbed the baby from the taxi and run off into the house. I was, what happened?

**Me:** Where did everybody go?

**My grandmother:** Where did he go with the baby?

**Me:** So, he was excited?

**My grandmother:** He was so excited, yes.

.....

My grandmother and I would go on to spend seven years and hundreds of pots of tea talking about Harald and analyzing every cryptic letter, every word he wrote. But that first interview – that was the first time I heard from her directly about Harald. She was so frank and open and honest. I find it so sweet. And heartbreaking.

After we finished recording that interview about Harald, Memme walked into her den, retrieved Harald's diary, and asked me if I wanted to read it. I sat up all night reading the diary – just like my grandmother had done in 1945 when her friend retrieved the diary for her from the Swedish newspaper and sent it to her in the DP camp.

The diary is an incredible piece of history to read. He recounts, step by step, his attempts and then his ultimately successful escape from Estonia to Finland, as well as his decision to turn himself into Finnish authorities, which led to his imprisonment. He details his daily life in the Finnish jail and then the Finnish internment camp. He records his thoughts about his situation, documenting the news he hears on the radio and his hopes that the United States and England would rescue the Baltics so he could reunite with his family and life could go back to normal. He expresses his love for his wife and daughter, how much he misses them, and how once he's reunited with them, he will change his ways – that is, not going out with his friends as much.

Of course, while I was reading the diary that night, I already knew how the story ended, making the experience even more painful. I cried during and after I finished reading it, because I felt like Harald finally made sense to me. I could hear his voice in my head. His thought processes felt familiar to me, his analytic nature seemed similar to my own. This one-dimensional figure now had depth, he displayed intelligence and self-awareness. I just kept thinking, why couldn't they have ended up together?

In the diary, Harald listed the name of the Finnish island where he landed when he escaped in that boat from Estonia. He was rescued by a Finnish family that was kind to him and allowed him to rest and recuperate on their island for five days. He wrote the name of the island and the family name in the diary. I wondered what it might be like to go to that island.

Memme pulled out photos of him, as a child, as a young man, as a young husband. I pored over photos of him. I imagined what it might have been like to have him in my life. We were both middle children. Would I have been his favorite grandchild? He had dark hair, too, like me. In the photos and from my grandmother's stories about him, he seemed serious, shy, brooding – like me. Would I have felt more understood if he had been in my life? I started to think that knowing more about him would fill in some missing pieces, help me understand myself or perhaps my less-than-stellar relationships with men.

From that point on, in our formal interviews but also in our conversations over tea, the questions about Harald poured out of me to my grandmother, sometimes the same questions over and over. I could never get enough of talking about him. Her initial reticence to discuss him melted away as the memories flooded back, especially after Ilmar, her husband, passed away in March 2014. Her grief over losing Ilmar flowed into grief about all the loss she'd experienced during the war with Harald. A figure slowly began to take shape. Almost like a sculpture taking shape slowly over

time, or those puzzles where you watch while a figure emerges, and you try to guess as quickly as you can what it will become before it's finished becoming.

I traveled to Estonia this past summer. I wanted to spend time there, to be in the cities and spaces where my family lived before they were forced to flee, where their bodies took up space and walked. I sat in the Werner Café, a 100+-year-old café where my grandmother and Harald might have met each other between classes when they studied together in medical school. I drove to Antsla, the town where they lived after they were married, where they served as district doctors, where my mother was a baby. I photographed landscapes they might have seen and breathed in scents they might have smelled. I listened to and learned from people who understood what it meant to have lived through those times.

I spent one afternoon in the Estonian National Archives with my friend, archivist Kaia Ivask. I met Kaia for the first time in 2014 when I contacted the Archives to try to find any information that had about Harald, Endel and Karl after starting work with my grandmother. During that first visit, she introduced me to “the Black Book” (the volumes are black), *Political Arrests in Estonia 1940-1988*. I was able to see, in print, my great-grandfather, great-uncle, and grandfather's names, their birthdates and birthplaces, professions, dates they were arrested, the Soviet legal code used as justification for their arrests, and what they were doing that led to their arrests. It was powerful and heartbreaking to see their names in print after having heard their names all my life (my brother's middle name is Endel in honor of our great-uncle) and after listening to my grandmother's stories about them over the prior year. Suddenly they felt real, and what had happened to them felt cold, calculated, and horrific.

During this last visit, Kaia was able to pull for me the actual file the Soviets had compiled on Harald, including the interview of him when he was first arrested in Finland and brought to Leningrad (St. Petersburg) – 100 pages of files and notes about my grandfather, none of which I can understand myself, unfortunately, because they are written in either Estonian or Russian. Kaia helped me translate a few of the pages. I hope to find someone who can translate the documents word for word, so we'll have a full accounting of what happened to Harald – what he said in the interrogation, what they accused him of, what they charged him with.



Intersection in the town of Antsla, where my grandparents lived when my mother was a baby. Their house might have stood at this intersection.



The University of Tartu, where my grandparents met in medical school. My daughter and I took a two-week course here.



**Kaia Ivask explains what she found about Harald (August 5, 2022, National Archives)**

**[4:47]:** Listen to the clip [here](#).

**Kaia:** This is his file of arrestment.

**Me:** So, from the diary, it says he went from Helsinki to some kind of internment camp, which is where it ends. His diary, the diary that we have from him trying to escape. He lands in this island in Finland, then he goes to Helsinki. Then they sent him to an internment camp somewhere in Finland. Then we assume he went to Siberia, but apparently not. They must have taken him to St Petersburg to this trial.

**Kaia:** He was arrested in 1945 in Leningrad, the 28th of April. Leningrad Petersburg. It's in Estonian. It's easy to read. He was in German army until September 20, 1944. He was in [?] in Estonia in the end of '44. And later with the ship went to Finland, where he tried to stay there in 29th of March 1945.

**Me:** Hm, I wonder if he tried to escape.

**Kaia:** And he was taken to the Soviets with 15 other 15 other Estonians-- were taken to Red Army. And taking back to-- some kind of ah Viburi, Viburi is a city in the border of Finland and Russia. He was taken to Viburi and, yeah, of course, he didn't reach to Estonia again because the trial was in Peterburi, or Leningrad, and then sent to Siberia. To arrest and search him. Then was the trial. Yeah, because he was in German army. So, he was -- I think these, they had one trial for all of these 16, 16 men who were taken here from Finland. So that's why you here all the different names.

**Me:** Okay. The way you said it, it almost sounded like he tried to get out. And it's funny because the last entry of his diary says something like, "I think we might need to move again." And it almost sounds like he might try to escape. So, I wonder if they did try to get out. It was like a very, it wasn't a very secure internment camp, like they could have just left. So, I wonder if they tried to escape and were caught ... March 29<sup>th</sup>, he tried to stay--

**Kaia:** Where he was tried to stay living.

**Me:** So maybe he tried to escape?

**Kaia:** Oh, he was, on March 29, he was handed over to Red Army, and then they reached to Leningrad for this April, maybe? He was an Army prisoner or something, and then he was arrested, officially.



A prison photo from Harald's Soviet file in the National Archives.

My mother and father traveled to Estonia this summer, too, during the early part of my trip. My mother's relative, Toomas, is her only close connection to her father's family. Toomas drove us all around Estonia during our trip: to the town where Harald and his brothers grew up and the school they went to, as well as the military school they attended. One day, Toomas drove my daughter and me all around the northwest coast trying to figure out from which spot on the coastline near Paldiski Harald and his two friends might have launched their sailboat when they escaped in December 1944. We got out of the car in several locations and looked out at the sea, out toward Finland, imagining: Was this where they left from that night? What would that have been like? Was this the lighthouse that guided them out to sea?

I visited the prison museum, the KGB museum, and any other museum, exhibit, or memorial I could find to research and learn as much as I could about the World War II or post-World War II era – to try to understand what my grandfather (and also my grandmother's father and brother) might have experienced. I looked for our relatives' names on the Memorial Wall. In Estonia, in the other Baltic States, in all of the former Soviet bloc, this "history" is all very present and still being actively researched, as every family has been affected or lost someone, and many are still trying to find out what happened to their loved ones these many decades later. Like we are.



Views from the Paldiski lighthouse looking toward Finland.

A huge part of what was missing from the Harald picture was filled in during the fortuitous and spontaneous trek my mother, daughter, and I took at the end of our Estonia trip. We were able to visit the island where my grandfather and his two countrymen were hosted when they fled Estonia in their sailboat in December 1944 – the island Harald wrote about in his diary, the one I dreamt of one day visiting when I first read that diary nine years ago.

Harald and his shipmates landed on an outer island in the Finnish archipelago, “half dead” and hypothermic. They were rescued by two brothers, Finnish soldiers just back from the war who’d been out fishing in the early morning. The brothers carried my grandfather and his friends – and towed their boat – back to their home island, where they hosted them, fed them, and allowed them to rest and recuperate.

We met Henrik, the son of one of those two brothers and heard the stories Henrik’s father told him about finding my grandfather. We had the incredible privilege of visiting the island where my grandfather spent five days. It struck me while we were there, on this small, quiet island of incredible natural beauty – beauty that even in his traumatized state, my grandfather made note of in his diary – that this island was where he spent his last five days of freedom. It felt like hallowed ground.

**The Diary: Searching for Alglo [13:00]:** Watch the video [here](#).

*August 12, 2022: Alglo Island, Finland*

**Me:** Looking out over the water from our small beach, I can see past islands of varied shapes and sizes in the foreground, to a misty gray, flat-shaped island in the far-off distance. That’s the one. That’s where my grandfather, Harald, and his two compatriots landed in their broken-down fishing boat 78 years ago in December 1944, during World War II. They didn’t know how to sail, but they did it anyway to flee from the Soviet Army, which had invaded their homeland of Estonia. I can see the island from where I sit, because it’s early morning in August and it’s been light since 5 a.m. But my grandfather landed in the early morning of December 8th, 1944, when it would have been pitch black at this hour. So it was by sheer luck, or a miracle, that someone found them on that island at the edge of the Finnish archipelago where they landed, half dead. It was even luckier that the men who found them were not Russian and were not inclined to turn them over to the Russians, especially since the Finns had recently signed a so-called peace treaty with the Soviets, promising to turn over any Estonians who had fled. As I stare out at that island, which isn’t much more than bare rock, I reflect on the journey that has brought me to this place, because it was almost exactly nine years ago, in August 2013, when my grandmother first agreed to let me interview her about my grandfather, Harald. After that interview, she sent me home with Harald’s diary, the one he kept for the six months after the war separated them. That night I read about the island of Alglo, and a seed was planted in my heart that I barely admitted to myself, and certainly mentioned to no one else for almost a decade. I needed to visit that island, which felt sacred somehow, since it was the place where my grandfather spent his last five days of freedom.

*While in Estonia this past summer researching my family's history, I decided to try to get to Alglo Island. My cousin helped me find a contact, and one amazing thing led to another ...*

*August 10, 2022: Alglo, Finland. Almost exactly nine years after I first read about Alglo, Finland, in Harald's diary, my mother, daughter, and I found ourselves sitting as guests around the dining room table of Henrik Ahlbom. Henrik's father, Kalle, was one of the men who rescued my grandfather on December 8, 1944.*

**Me:** I had the great honor of sitting at a table with Henrik on the left and to hear the story that Henrik's father, Kalle, one of the brothers who saved my grandfather, passed down to him in the same Swedish dialect that my grandfather writes about in the diary -- the one he couldn't understand. And I'm sitting and sharing coffee at his table with him and his daughter, Ava. (She's at the far end of the table.) And feeling the same incredible sense of humanity and hospitality and warmth and welcome that my grandfather did. And I'm so moved. Kaspar, sitting in the foreground, whose family has been on the island for the last 120 years, and whose name my cousin found for me this summer to make my dream of reaching Alglo come true was able to bridge the gap and translate for me and Mom with Henrik, as did his daughter, and was also able to provide some context of the archipelago and history of the island itself. In the next two photos, my mother is sitting and standing next to Henrik. I feel time walking in parallel as Harald's daughter, my mother, is besides Kalle's son, Henrik, and they talk about the fateful encounter their fathers had 78 years ago.

**Harald (diary entry):** December 8th, 1944, at 7:30 a.m., We land on a rocky island. First time I put my foot on a rock on Finnish soil. I fall on my back. It feels like the Rock is swaying. And in addition, it is slippery. The cold is unbearable. We tie up the boat and shake each other's hands. And in our thoughts. We thank God for saving us. A boat appears in the distance as soon as we have stepped on the rock island. The question is, who are they? Are they Finns or Russians? We strain to listen to their language. From the few words we can hear, we decide it is not Russian language, whatever it was. We signal to them. The boat is at the shore in no time, and we clearly hear the Finnish language.

*In the conversation around the coffee table, you can hear:*

- *Henrik speaking a Swedish dialect, recounting the stories that his father, Kalle, told him about finding my grandfather. (He speaks the same dialect that his father spoke to my grandfather.)*
- *Kasper speaking in English, translating for Henrik.*
- *Henrik's daughter, Eva, also translating for Henrik.*
- *My mother, Mall, speaking in English and responding about my grandfather.*

**Kaspar:** But Henrik just told that when they found them there out on this small island they were really, really cold, almost like dead, already, that they couldn't walk, they were so freezeed. So, they had to carry them inside to the house to get them warm again.

**Harald (diary entry):** Soon we see a typical picture of a Finnish farmhouse on a rock island. The house is red with white doors and window frames. As soon as we arrive, we get inside to get rid of our wet clothing. How wonderfully they take



care of us, serving us hot coffee. We sit all day in front of the stove to get warm. These people are Finnish Swedes. The boys were released from military service recently. They're very amazed we got across to sea with our boat. Our clothes were put to dry. We were given cigarettes and food. And to our great surprise, a sauna is prepared for us.

**Harald (diary entry):** December 9th, 1944. Soon the boys are inviting us for a meal. The people are reassuring us that we do not have to rush. We can take our time and they offer us hospitality. Only now we notice how beautiful is the place where we have arrived. The name of the island is Alglo. Our wonderful resting place and unforgettably hospitable family.

**Kaspar:** Then, after the three days at Alglo Island, as your father has written in his diary, then the Ahlboms had their boat already up on land because it was winter. But the neighbor Sundstrom still had a motorboat. So, they took the neighbor Sundstrom's motorboat, then up to the city of Ekenas to see the authorities, the police. And then the police had said, do you really have such a small boat that you can't continue your trip to Sweden?

**Henrik:** [Speaking in a Swedish dialect.]

**Kaspar:** Okay. So, Henrik tells that his father had tried to tell your father that they should try to go to Sweden, take the train, but they didn't know where to go. And there was also no bigger boat available here in the archipelago. So that I suppose then that lets your father then wanted himself that he stayed by the authorities, and the police. And this is something that [Swedish dialect] Henrik's father had told him several times. So.

**Harald (diary entry):** December 10th, 1944. We have come to the conclusion that the best and honorable way is to report to the police or Coast Guard about our arrival. Maybe they can help us to move out. Our new friends and helpers promised to notify the Coast Guard. We are spending a wonderful time with the residents at Alglo. We would love to chat with them, but they speak only Swedish. Tomorrow we expect the Coast Guard to come and see us.

**Kaspar:** And so, then they left him there at the police and never heard anything more from him.

**Eva:** His father had tried to tell them, if you go to the authorities, they will send you back. So, I think it was--

**My mother:** He knew.

**Eva:** Yeah, but maybe they didn't know where they were going to be sent.

**Kaspar:** Exactly. And of course, then we have to remember the language barrier that they had because Kalle Ahlbom and Per spoke only Swedish, and your father spoke Estonian. So, they didn't have a common language. I recall reading in his diary that the Ahlbom family, they spoke very much, but they didn't understand anything what they say because they spoke Swedish. So that's probably one reason that they didn't quite understand. But, but, but the Ahlboms were already informed about the new peace agreement that Finland had made with the Soviet Union that stated that everybody who's escaped from

Soviet Union to Finland must be given back. So that was of course, politically, very hard times in Finland in the end of the war after that so.

**My mother:** Of course, we understand that.

**Kaspar:** And the police had also themselves said that those don't come here.

**My mother:** So, everybody tried to give him good advice, but for whatever reason. Maybe he felt weaker, too, after that. I think the boat ride was--

**Kaspar:** They were probably, you know, suffering from severe hypothermia. So, you are very sick and weak after experience like that.

**My mother:** Yeah, and a trauma and shock and all of that.

*August 11, 2022: Kaj, Seija, and Kaspar Fabritius, and Gunnar Klingstedt spend the entire day with us, walking us through every building on the island that corresponds to every Algo-related entry in Harald's diary. They seem to have studied the diary even more closely than I have. They have tried to preserve the buildings, so they look similar to old photos they show us. I have never experienced such warmth, generosity, hospitality.*

**Me:** My mother, daughter, and I are guided by the generous family members of the island as we walk within and among the words of my grandfather's diary, tracing which rooms Harald might have slept in, where in the nautical maps was most likely left the mainland from. I could almost see Harald walking around the island with us, sitting in the physical space of my body, within the physical spaces where my grandfather walked and ate, slept and took his sauna on Algo Island. I felt at points as if time, past and present, were walking side by side.

**Me:** Kasper drove us out to the edge of the archipelago, to the rock island where my grandfather actually landed. We could feel how much rougher the waves were out there. Not sheltered by the rest of the islands. And yet, it felt nothing like open sea would have felt to Harald. It felt nothing like nighttime. I felt nothing like December. It felt nothing like war time. It felt nothing like sailing in a boat you don't know how to sail. Without your family. Terrified. Hungry. Afraid for your life.

In conversations I had with my grandmother over the years, we would discuss all the possible scenarios for why Harald might have made this choice or that one. But truthfully, we had so little information about him and his life at that point. Letters Harald wrote from Siberia were cryptic – they had to be because of government censors – and messages were passed through many hands, so it was difficult for us to arrive at anything that felt like the truth.

I also used to imagine having conversations with Harald. Actually, I would imagine the questions I would ask, but I couldn't imagine his answers. One of the most important questions, since this haunted my grandmother and I tried but failed to find explanations for her in my research, was and still is: Did he choose to stay in Siberia *of his own free will*? By “of his own free will,” I mean he would have had to have means and opportunity and would have suffered no negative consequences (and none of his family or loved ones would have either) by leaving Siberia and

pursuing a different life or reuniting with Memme and Mom. I have always assumed that the answer to this question was No, that he didn't choose to stay there.

After that critical question, I had what felt like thousands more for him:

Were you ever given the option to go back to reunite with Memme and Mom? Why didn't you try to come to the United States when Memme petitioned the Nixon Administration, which was trying to get some prisoners released from Siberia? Were you threatened with going back to the concentration camp? Were your parents threatened? Or did you feel you had been separated from Memme for too long by then and it wouldn't have worked to reunite? Did you feel that your lives were too different? Were you afraid that you wouldn't be able to earn a decent living or have a fulfilling career working as a doctor outside the Soviet Union?

With all that happened between my grandmother and my grandfather, I believe she felt his biggest betrayal was his keeping secret from her that he had another family. We don't know when he became involved with Juri's mother. But at some point, he should have been honest and told my grandmother directly, but he never did. So, my questions regarding this are simple and straightforward, but I could never imagine how he'd answer:

When and how did you meet Nadja? I believe she was also a doctor and that her father ran the clinic where you worked, is that correct? How did that relationship develop – professional colleagues into friends into a deeper relationship? Why did you deny to family members that you were with Nadja? Why didn't you want Memme to know about Nadja? Why didn't you tell Memme yourself – in a letter, at least? Is it simply that you were being a coward? You said in your letter to Leo that you were "not as cold as you seemed" – what did you mean by that? That indicates there was more to the story: Did you still love Memme but knew you'd never be able to leave Siberia and felt you had to move on? Was there pressure on you from officials for you to get together with someone local, and then eventually your relationship evolved, and you started a family together (Juri)?

Even if you weren't free to provide a truthful explanation for everything in 1959 or 1960, at the time when all of this happened, couldn't you have made the effort to write a letter 10 years later, 15 years later to explain everything that happened, tell the truth? In 1975, Mom tried to come meet you in Leningrad. Why didn't you show up? You could at least have met her to tell her the truth about everything that happened, bring some peace of mind to her and Memme. She stayed in that hotel for three days, waiting for you. You never came. Why? Were you afraid? (This seems to be a theme, Harald. Everyone talks about what an honorable man you were. But when it comes to Memme and Mom, you don't come through.) Mom heard that you couldn't come to meet her in Leningrad because you weren't able to get permission to travel again to Estonia – you'd traveled the prior year for the death of one of your parents. Was that true? It seems like you were able to travel pretty freely, but you couldn't get special permission to see a daughter you'd been separated from for 30 years? It seems hard to believe.

Or were you afraid to go to Leningrad because you'd been imprisoned there?<sup>15</sup> Knowing even the little I know about your experience there, I can understand why you wouldn't want to return there. What I cannot understand is why you didn't

write a letter to Mom explaining why you didn't show up. Or did you write her a letter via your brother, Leo, and he didn't pass it to her again, like he'd done with the box of letters we found in 2014? You just never explained any of your behavior. Did you think you weren't hurting anyone? If you cared at all about Memme or Mom, you would have tried to explain. Your actions – the fact that you never tried to explain your behavior or try to soothe their worries – indicate that you did not care about them. Is that the lesson here?

After the time I spent this summer in his spaces, Harald no longer feels like such a void or total abstraction. His name doesn't evoke emptiness and coldness. I used to imagine what it would have been like to meet him. Now I have seen the places he has seen, smelled the smells, my *feet* have walked where *his* have. I would like to think he somehow *knows*, *somehow* knows that Mom, Sofia, and I went looking for him on that island.

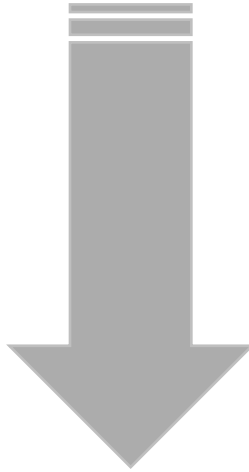
Now that I've been to Estonia and to Alglo Island, experiencing, seeing, learning, feeling, reading, and trying to understand situations from Harald's point of view, even those imagined conversations have assumed added dimensions. I began to wonder, what if Harald had the opportunity to tell his own story, in his own words, with his own voice? After being on that island with my mother this summer, I wondered if my grandmother would have wanted to come if she'd been able to? What might it look like for the three of us to meet with Harald and ask him the questions we each needed answers to – questions we will never be able to resolve in real life but that haunt us nonetheless?

The Soviet regime, government censors, his family, himself – all of these forces contributed to Harald's silencing or to the hijacking of his voice. What would it look like for me to *unsilence* him, to use what I already knew about Harald – from the diary, from his letters, from the embodiment of the stories I've heard my entire life combined with what I learned this summer about the Soviet regime, what happened to Harald specifically, and the experience of the Estonian people – to try to tell his story?

If I did that, would I be hijacking Harald's voice as others have? Or could I help *unsilence him* and, in some strange way, *myself* along the way? Returning to my questions from the beginning about oral history and our obligation to those who were silenced, I started exploring, experimenting with the oral history methodology itself. I invite you to take a journey with me ...

Come.  
I invite you to  
suspend disbelief  
for just enough time to  
take a journey with me to a place  
somewhere between reality and fiction  
grounded in the body's knowledge and intuition  
based in truth and sprinkled with logical imaginings  
accented by knowledge gained from extensive research  
woven with fantasy as well as a bit of benefit of the doubt

to  
offset  
those  
who  
silenced,  
manipulated,  
hijacked,  
omitted  
his  
voice.



## v. fantasy oral history

### preface

My mother, grandmother, and I step out of the car at Vetka, the farm in rural southern Estonia where Harald's parents lived and where he would have lived, too, if he'd ever returned from Siberia. Heck, if the war hadn't happened, Memme and Mom would have lived here at one time, too, I guess.

I return from my daydream, and I see Harald. He is far off, seated on a wooden chair on the grass, with his back toward us. He is facing the lake, which is crystalline in its stillness, especially dramatic against the darkness of the pine forest behind it. I have been waiting for this moment for weeks, dreaming about it for years, but now that it's here, I get a pit in my stomach. He looks so calm, relaxed, serene—not at all how I feel. For a split second I panic, wondering, does he remember that we're coming today?

A moment later, the three of us freeze, as if walking into a wall. We must have seen it at the exact same time. Harald lowers his head into his hands and his body starts to shake. He is sobbing. We don't move. Or breathe. We don't look at each other, we don't have to. We can't take our eyes away from him.

Memme is the first one to break away. Mom and I stand still and let her go. We watch as she walks stoically across the grass toward Harald, with that pristine lake as a backdrop. I wonder how many times during their young marriage they were together in this place, walking across this grass, taking in this view. When they were young, did they pay attention to the extraordinary beauty around them?

Harald lifts his head as she approaches, obviously aware someone is behind him. Turning around, he simultaneously falls out and tries to leap out of his chair. I strain to hear, while feeling guilty for not respecting their privacy. But it doesn't matter anyway, it's obvious by their posture: She is stoic, he is prostrating himself as he bends over low and does not meet her eye. She doesn't move. I don't breathe. A few moments that feel like hours pass.

He can't tell but I can, from her face, that each moment that passes brings with it a softening. Suddenly she bridges the distance between them with a few easy steps and lays her hand on his back gently, leaning down, coaxing him to rise. He does so slowly, hesitantly.

I am too far away to be able to discern what she is saying to him and vice versa, but later tonight she will tell me exactly what occurs:

"Harald, please stand up and look at me," Aino says.

Harald gets up slowly, his eyes meet hers. Then he looks up, past her, to me and mom.

"Harald," Aino begins, realizing how strange it feels to say his name *to* him after all these years. "We are all here for the same reason. I think. Peace of mind. We want to free ourselves of our burdens, the secrets, the pain, the anger, the resentments, the misunderstandings, the *guilt*, everything we've been holding onto all of these years, decades. I do. Well, Rebecca is here to meet you, of course. She's been on a journey. She's been with me on mine and taken me on one, too. Mall is here for so many reasons.

“It has taken great courage for all of us to be here, but especially you. I want to thank you for coming and being willing to speak to all of us about these difficult subjects. Not many people would. Young people today seem to think this is good for us, for our ‘mental health.’ I guess we will see how we all feel afterward. But maybe at least we can walk away from this day feeling a little more peaceful. Isn’t it time we felt that Harald?”

Harald nods slowly, “I agree.”

Aino hesitates then, turning to look at Mall and Rebecca before looking back at Harald to continue.

“Harald, I want you to know, before you go into this interview, that I told Rebecca about what happened that night. The reason we had to get married. In case she asks you about it, I want you to know that she knows.”

Harald slowly lifts his head to turn to her. At first, he looks confused, trying to wrap his mind around what she’s talking about. She can see as he moves from confusion to recognition to surprise to concern. “What did you tell her? And *why*? She’s your – I mean she’s *our* granddaughter. Why would you talk about that with her?”

“You asked what I told her. The answer is everything I remember,” she says this curtly. “And why?” she pauses for a moment. “Over the past few years, I have come to confide in her about all of the difficult details of my life. And she has confided in me, too. I trust her. I trust her so much that I actually asked her to tell Mall for me. She did”.

Harald looks at Aino with pain in his eyes. He rubs his hands, then rubs his head with his hands.

Aino can’t tell if he’s angry, scared, worried, or something else.

Then, he says so softly she almost doesn’t hear him, “Yes. They needed to know all of it.”

Aino nods. She looks over to Mall and Rebecca and nods to them as well, to indicate that everything is ok, and that she and Harald will be heading their way shortly.

“Harald, before we really begin, I just wanted to say I have no idea what happened to you in prison, at that concentration camp. If you want to tell me, I will listen now. But I want you to know how sorry I am – that I wasn’t *always* praying 10,000 angels your way, that you were thinking about me being angry with you, that I was so deep in my grief I couldn’t see anything else clearly.”

She looks up at him slowly. She is much less sure of herself than she had been a few minutes earlier.

Harald looks at her.

He doesn’t move a muscle.

He looks confused.

Then his face registers recognition of what he just heard, and the next moment he collapses onto the ground in huge, heaving sobs. Memme steps beside him, kneels down, puts her arm around

him, and gently strokes his back to calm him. It is when she is kneeling beside him that she turns to us to beckon us over, too.

I hesitate, feeling like the moment is too intimate for us to intrude, but Mom takes my arm and gently leads me on with her down the hill. That surprises me, since Mom has been the one who has been, up until our Finland trip, a little cooler with her emotions. But just like when the video call to meet her half-brother in Siberia finally became a reality, all hesitation falls away, and she leads us bravely forward with an open heart.

As we approach them, my first thought is, he's so small. In my imagination, he was always such a towering figure—physically, next to Memme, but also in character, the way everyone talked about him being a wonderful mediator, someone others came to for counseling, a leader-type.

When we reach the pair of them, we hold out our hands. Harald looks up, takes a breath, grabs Mom's hand, then mine. We support his arms and help him to his feet. All four of us then collapse into a hug.

It is very unexpected.

And lovely.

We linger.

Nobody wants to end it—overwhelmed by emotion, including fear of what to say next.

I am next to Harald, so he turns and looks at me straight on and says, "Tere, Rebecca." Time stands still. My heart is in my throat, and I must hold back tears. His voice! I am hearing his voice! It is deep, raspy, resonant, richer than I imagined. He says my name so beautifully, rolling the "R" as if he treasures saying it and has been waiting to say it for some time. I'm too emotional to speak – of course. (I'm always the emotional one.) So, I simply lean in and hug him. Tightly. He hugs me back like a bear, not rushing, like he wants to be holding on. It occurs to me that he might be stalling a little bit, too, afraid to turn to Mom. But eventually he does. As he turns, she makes it easy for him by holding out her hands to him.

Mom, through this entire journey, including my interviews with her, even when she gets a little emotional, has been in total control of herself and the situation, always ensuring that everyone else is OK. She is always "totally fine," as if there is "nothing to see here, folks!" So, I am shocked when I look from Harald to Mom to see that she is crying, tears just streaming down her face as she stares at him, he stares at her, and then she says quietly, "Taata," (dad in Estonian) and gently leans her head forward into his chest.

Harald wraps his long arms around her, lays his head down over hers, and whispers softly in Estonian. I can only make out "Mallekene" (little Mall) and "Nuku" (doll), which I know are the terms of endearment he used when addressing her as a child and in letters he wrote to her. Memme and I look at each other with understanding. I walk toward Memme, thinking we're going to let them have time alone, but Mom says, "No, you don't have to go anywhere. We're all here together. We all need to do this together. It's ok. I'm ok."

"Mom, are you sure? You need time with Harald. It's ok. We'll go for a walk, and you can fill us in when we get back," I say, as I continue walking toward Memme.

Harald puts his arm around me and pulls me back in toward him and kisses me on the forehead, "It's taken three generations for us to find our way back to each other. And it's taken me your



entire life to find you. I don't want to be separated from any of you. Just stay right here next to me. All of you. Please. We've lost so much time already. No more secrets. No more hiding."

He leads us over to a spot we hadn't noticed when we drove up. A fire pit is set up and stocked with firewood ready to be lit. A tray is filled with food, a thermos, and mugs. Four wooden chairs are neatly arranged, and each is stacked with several blankets. He obviously prepared for us to settle in for a long afternoon.

When I wrote to Harald asking if we could meet for a candid conversation about everything from the missing years, I asked if I could record the conversation. Mom and Memme agreed to this, and he did also. Walking down to the spot he chose, I can see he has even thought of that. A small square table, just big enough for my recording equipment, has been set up beside one of the chairs, with an extension cord hanging over the corner. My eye traces the connecting chain of extension cords he has run from that square table in the middle of the grassy hill all the way back to the house – hundreds of feet. How many extension cords must he have used?! I keep looking at that chain, back and forth, because I can't quite take it in – the effort he's gone to – for me, for us. I reflexively glance at him and realize he's been watching me, waiting for me to come to this realization. My chest tightens, my eyes blur. I close my eyes and a feeling like warm honey and chills combined starts at the top of my head and flows down to my toes.

As we approach the methodically arranged chairs arm in arm, we simultaneously feel they are too far apart for the closeness we feel. We begin scooching the chairs closer together. While Mom and Memme pour out tea and plate sandwiches and cake, Harald gets the fire going, and I set up my equipment.

We sit down. We each find ways to connect to another somehow: touching knees, holding hands, sharing blankets. No one wants to feel separate.

Then the conversation begins.

## fantasy oral history interview

### **Narrators:**

- Harald Tuul (my grandfather)
- Aino Tuul Kaevats (my grandmother), I call her *Memme*
- Mall Tuul Kiil (my mother), I call her *Mom*

**Interviewer:** Rebecca Kiil (me)

**Location:** Harald's Farm, Vetka, Estonia

**Date:** Outside traditional concepts of time

**Rebecca:** It's a beautiful afternoon in Estonia. We are at Vetka, the farm that belonged to Harald's parents, my great-grandparents, Marie and Mart Tuul. I'm here with my mother, Mall Tuul Kiil; and her parents, my grandparents, Harald Tuul and Aino Tuul Kaevats. This is the first time the four of us have been together. Ever. This is the first time I have met my grandfather Harald. This is the first time Harald has seen Aino and Mall (from now on I will be referring to them as Memme and Mom) since September 18, 1944. We all have communicated by letter, but Harald hasn't spoken to any of us by phone or in person before this meeting today. We will be discussing topics that will be difficult. Everyone has agreed to participate in this conversation and to have it recorded. But of course, if anyone is uncomfortable or doesn't want to answer my (or anyone's) questions – Harald, I tend to ask a lot of questions, just ask Memme [everyone laughs] – you do not need to answer. And you can always delete anything from the recording if you decide later that you don't want it included.

I just want to say one more thing. I am going to ask questions and try not to respond with my voice like I normally would in a conversation – mostly for the audio, so it's easier to listen to. But please also use that as a way, when you're not talking to just listen to others and give each other *time* to talk and process what you are saying. Don't jump in and try to fix things – Mom, that's for you. Allow silences. If anything, let *me* guide the conversation – if you trust me, at least at first. We can always go back. Does that make sense? Does anyone have questions?

[Everyone shakes their heads.]

Is everyone comfortable?

[Everyone nods.]

You still can talk right now – we haven't started!

[Everyone laughs.]

OK. For the sake of this tape, and whoever in the future will listen to this, could we each please state our name, who we are in relationship to each other, when and where we were born, where we currently live? I will start ...

**Rebecca:** I am Rebecca Kiil. I am daughter to Mall Kiil, granddaughter to Aino Tuul Kaevats and Harald Tuul. I was born February 19, 1971, in New Jersey, USA. I am an oral historian, so I am recording my family history for future generations. Mom, you go next please.

**Mall:** My name is Mall Kiil. I am Rebecca's mother, and Aino and Harald's daughter. I was born in Tartu, Estonia, on April 16, 1943. I left Estonia when I was 1 ½ years old, during World War II, and grew up in the U.S. with my mother, who I call "Memme." I have no memories of my father.

[Mall looks at Harald, half-smiles and shrugs.]

He was separated from us during the war when I was 18 months old. Today is the first time I have seen or talked to him.

[Aino takes Mom's hand and squeezes it.]

**Aino:** My name is Aino Tuul Kaevats. I was born July 7, 1917, in Tallinn, Estonia. I married Harald on December 7, 1941, and had Mall in April 1943. Mall and I left our home on September 22, 1944, a few days after Harald went back to the front line, because the situation was so terrible. I didn't intend to leave Estonia, but we had no choice. We traveled west through Europe, lived in DP camps in Germany for several years, and arrived in the U.S. in 1949. We lived with several refugee families until I was able to afford an apartment where we could live – just Mother and Lydia, Me and Mall, and Nanni to help with the girls. That's how I was able to raise Mall alone, without Harald. I worked as an anesthesiologist in New York City, and especially early on in my career, sometimes I had to be away from home for two weeks at a time. I couldn't have done it if I hadn't been able to bring Nanni here from the DP camp to stay with Mall. In my 60s, I remarried Ilmar Kaevats on February 24, 1977. I, well we [she looks at Harald], have three grandchildren: Sandra, Rebecca, and Allan.

**Harald:** I am Harald Tuul, born February 12, 1916. I met Aino in medical school at the University of Tartu in Estonia. We married in December 1941. I am Mall's father. I left my family on September 18, 1944, with the idea that I was helping to save the country. But because I did that, as hard as I tried, I couldn't catch up to them after they fled to escape the Red Army. I was imprisoned in Finland, then Leningrad, then Siberia. When I was released from the labor camp after many years, I remained in Siberia and worked as a doctor. I never remarried officially, but I had a common law marriage with Nadja. We had a son, Juri, who was born in 1968.

[Harald pauses, then continues slowly.]

My second family brought me back to life. They were not a replacement for my first family, which was my life.

[Long silence]

**Rebecca:** Can you say more about the last part – “brought you back to life”?

**Harald:** [Looks at Aino, then at Mall, then at Rebecca, then back to Aino, where his gaze lingers.]

Sometimes I'm not sure which parts are real, and which are dreams – or nightmares. For such a long time, I used my mind to play tricks on my body just to stay alive, so sometimes I can't tell what's real and what isn't.

I can't quite believe this is real. Are we here by my lake sitting peacefully? Am I forgiven? Are Aino and I at peace? Is Mallekene here beside me?

I don't know.

[Harald shakes his head. He takes his time to gather his thoughts before he continues. Tears are streaming down Aino's cheeks.]

For a long time, I was strong. I thought I would get through it and find you. I'd been through difficult times. We'd *all* been through difficult times. I'd survived hunger, war. I could recover from those.

But the boat. That – I don't know how to say – it changed how I viewed my fate, mortality. We almost died that night. [Long pause] I'd been hurt before, in danger. But that night was different. Something about the cold, the dark, the disorientation, and not being able to rely on the person next to you. Being so vulnerable, for so long.

Something in my mind, or spirit, broke on that trip, and I don't think it ever quite healed. Some confidence or hope or feeling that God had his hand on me disappeared that night. I've tried to get it back. I sometimes pretend that I've gotten it back, but I haven't. It's still missing. It feels like a complete and utter abandonment by the world, the planet, all the forces of science and math and medicine that I studied and through which the world always made sense to me – everything betrayed me that night.

Even you.

[Harald looks at Aino and Mall. Aino and Mall look up, surprised, confused.]

You both abandoned me that night. I couldn't conjure you in my mind, as hard as I tried. I kept trying to calm my mind by thinking of you, but I couldn't. My body, my mind – perhaps because of the hypothermia, perhaps because I was in shock – wouldn't do what I wanted it to.

So, I couldn't even find you.

I was completely alone.

In the dark.

On the sea.

Facing deadly waves, the height of mountains, the temperature of icebergs.

My comrades and I – well, one was useless on the bottom of the boat – couldn't control the boat because it was broken. And nature didn't seem to be inclined to just take us down with the breakers and let us be done with it. It seemed to want to terrorize us. So, there we were, adrift and at the mercy of the sea, in what felt like an unending nightmare.

[Harald closes his eyes. It is obvious that this memory is still very clear and painful. It takes him a few moments to gather himself.]

Well, after many long hours, it did end. And as you know, in the morning, we landed on a rock island in Finland and were rescued by those young men and brought to their lovely family. Rest and sauna and kindness were a balm after so many painful hours on top of difficult weeks and months we had been living in hiding trying to evade the authorities.

I surprised myself by letting down my guard so easily with them. I was exhausted, so maybe I just didn't have any fight left. But even there, while resting, my body still felt terror. They tried to tell us to get back in the boat, to keep going to Sweden. In that moment, though, I couldn't imagine anything more terrifying. I kept wishing we had drowned at sea. I didn't want to be a coward and commit suicide, but I just could not get back into that boat – for an even longer trip to Sweden.

The family was very kind and told us not to rush, but I also knew that our being there was putting them in danger. So, what were our choices?

Get on our broken boat to try to get to Sweden? No.

Stay and put the family in danger? No.

We could take our chances in the city, go honestly as officers and try to talk as equals to fellow officers, or try to find friends who could help us out. It wasn't a great option, but it was the only one that felt possible in that moment.

Obviously, we made the wrong choice.

It was getting harder and harder to deny the obvious: God had abandoned me.

[Harald stares into the fire. Rebecca is just about to ask another question, when he continues suddenly.]

Do you know they didn't know what to do with us in Finland? [Laughs cynically.] Poor fools. They could've pretended to look the other way and saved their own souls and ours *and* slept much better for the rest of their lives. But *they* chose wrong also.

We wasted away in that Finnish internment camp. But at least in that camp I could keep the diary. And at least I was able to send it to Sweden. So, you could find out a little bit about what happened to me.

[Harald looks at Aino. They hold each other's gaze for a few moments. She nods.]

**Rebecca:** When the diary ended – was that because you knew something was changing about your situation and you had to get rid of the diary? And if so, how did you know?

**Harald:** We made friends with some of the nurses. They gave us any information they could. But honestly, after so many months of war, and so many months of loss and defeat, you just start to see the doom coming with such clarity. You can't stop it or change it, but you can see it clearly. So, I gave the diary to one of the nurses with instructions to send it to my friends in Sweden. I don't know if the nurse or my friends decided to give it to the newspaper – but I'm thankful now for whoever did that since that is how you ended up with the diary and were able to find out what had happened to me.

**Rebecca:** Harald, I'm just going to interrupt you here for a second, just so we clarify this part for the record. And please correct anything I misstate. Instead of your friends holding the diary for Memme, someone gave or sold your diary to the Estonian newspaper in Sweden. That newspaper started printing pieces of your diary as a serial in a column called something like "A Soldier's Story," right?

**Harald:** Yes.

**Rebecca:** Memme, then your friends who had escaped to Sweden read the serial in the newspaper and recognized that it was Harald talking about you and mom and your friends, etc., even though no names were used. And your friends wrote to you in the DP camp where you were staying in Germany to tell you that they thought this newspaper had Harald's diary and were printing it as a serial.

**Aino:** Yes, but I didn't believe them, because Harald had never before kept a diary. They actually sent me one of the columns – it was called, "A Warrior's Diary," and it was definitely Harald's writing. So, I wrote a letter stating I was his wife and giving my friends permission to go to the newspaper to claim the diary. They did and then sent it to me in the DP camp in Germany. It took more than a month for me to get it back. So that must have been sometime around December 1947 – more than three years after we'd been separated. When I got that diary, I stayed up all night reading it. It felt like a piece of my heart, for one moment, was put back into place. Finally, I knew something about what had happened to him – at least up until he left that internment camp.

[Silence for a few moments.]

**Rebecca:** I'm sorry I interrupted you, Harald. Please continue.

**Harald:** We knew the end was coming for us, that the Soviets would come for us soon. Many groups had already been moved. So, some of us started planning our escape from that camp. The security was so relaxed there – not as much as when we'd first arrived, but more relaxed than a prison. So, if we were going to get out, it had to be now.<sup>16</sup> And we had a plan in process. There was a large group of men involved. That was our downfall, I guess, but it felt necessary at the time because we needed men from different parts of the camp for the plan to work. Unfortunately, the more people you involve, the less you can control or trust each party. Someone betrayed us—we don't know who or why.

The day before we were to escape, Soviet soldiers raided the camp and took out only those of us involved in the escape plot. All of us were taken to Leningrad to prison, eventually to stand trial together.

**Rebecca:** Well, but wasn't someone missing? If someone from the group betrayed you, wouldn't he have been spared punishment and, therefore, have been missing from prison and trial?

**Harald:** Oh, no, not necessarily. You're thinking like an American. No, under the Soviet system, we would never know who betrayed us. That person would have stayed with us to hear what we talked about and continue reporting back – about family members, etc. Do you understand?

From the moment we were arrested like that – just our group – from the moment I understood that someone in our group had betrayed us, and that it would be impossible to figure out who, I realized three things:

*First*, I could never trust anyone again with anything I said.

*Second*, any one of those men, including the men I fled from Estonia with, could have been the one who betrayed us. That meant that the person who betrayed us could know all about my family in Estonia: You [looking at Aino], You [looking at Mall], my parents, Leo, Jutta, friends, Aino's family at the farm. I might have put everyone I loved in danger because I had trusted one of those men. Any danger to anyone in the family from that moment forward would be my fault.

*Last*, I determined *in that moment* that I would do everything in my power to keep everyone I knew and loved safe. *Regardless of what that meant for my own safety.* As far as I was concerned, at that moment, my life and future ended. Considering I was in that prison, my future looked bleak anyway. My only purpose and goal for living was to ensure that you, Aino, and you, Mall, and my parents, if I had any say in anything, would be safe.

**Rebecca:** [Waits a few moments in case Harald wants to continue.]

I don't understand, what does that mean? You were on trial, going to prison. What could you possibly do?

**Harald:** Whatever I needed to do, whatever I could do. My life was no longer about my life.

[Silence in the group. No one moves or says a word. Minutes pass. My brain is spinning.]

**Rebecca:** Can you talk about what that meant then in real terms, for your life or what actions or inaction that decision caused you to take?

**Harald:** Well, I felt that my own carelessness had put everyone I loved at risk. Initially, my need to protect everyone from what I perceived as the danger I put them in gave me a purpose that had nothing to do with me or my own survival. I stopped thinking about myself or my own situation, which, believe me, was a blessing for me. I had gone so far down a hole of despair that I wanted to die. And although I hadn't died in the Finnish internment camp, I surely would have in the Leningrad prison. I was in the Leningrad prison for more than a year, because I had destroyed my identification papers in Estonia to keep myself safe. So, it took the Soviet authorities a long time to confirm my identity. During that time, they tried all sorts of techniques to *coax* me to provide them with information.

In fact, it got so bad at one point that one of the men who was in the boat with me – the one who wasn't much help – somehow, he'd gotten hold of a razor blade. We were in the same cell at that time. He came and sat by me. He offered to give me half the blade and then asked my medical advice about how to use the blade to cut his veins. They were using electrocution to interrogate us. His plan was to kill himself if they came back to get us for another round of interrogation.

Because I had this purpose now, this mission to keep my loved ones safe, I was no longer suicidal, and I had the will to withstand the interrogation. He did not. They *did* come back for him. He *did* attempt to use the blade but was unsuccessful. He got a brief reprieve in the infirmary, but the interrogations continued once he was returned to his cell.

**Rebecca:** That man wrote a book or an article about this – we found it this summer. He wrote about being in a jail cell with you and asking you how to use a blade to commit suicide.<sup>17</sup>

**Harald:** He did?

**Rebecca:** Yes. But he also wrote that he was commanding the boat,<sup>18</sup> which I knew was not true because I read your diary where you write about him being useless and seasick and basically being at the bottom of the boat the entire time. So, I didn't believe the story about the razor blades and the interrogation.

**Harald:** [Shaking his head.] I understand why he would *lie* about the boat – to make himself look better. But why tell the *truth* about the razor blades – it doesn't make him look good. I would think he would lie about that, too.

**Rebecca:** Harald, was the time in the Leningrad prison just a holding place until they identified you and figured out where to send you long-term?

**Harald:** Yes, exactly. Once they verified who I was, they realized I served in the German Army. It didn't matter to them that I was forced to serve in the Germany Army. We were an occupied nation and had no choice, we were conscripted. We were put into an Estonian Unit on the border to keep the Russians out, which believe me, we wanted to do. But, since I was in the German



Army, they could charge me as an enemy of the state, which carries a sentence of 10 years. They sent me to labor camp in Taischet, Siberia, for eight years.

Eight years.

Eight years.

By that point, it had already been almost two years since I'd seen you and it felt like I'd lived a lifetime without you already. How could I go eight more years?

Of course, on some level I knew I'd never see you again. It just felt so overwhelming to think about eight years in that desolate, frozen, barren place. And then after that – what? More of nothing. No life. No living. Not the relief that would come within death. But rather a suspended state.

During every interrogation they assured me that you, Aino, were dead. Or if you weren't dead, then you were with multiple other men (little did they know how well I know you and how ridiculous they sounded saying these things about you). Or if you weren't dead or with other men, then you had signed a paper swearing to the fact that I was pathetic for getting caught. They tried anything and everything to break my will.<sup>19</sup>

But their obvious ploys just cemented my resolve to protect you in the only way I knew how – to not ever break, to not react to what they said, to never let them see what you meant to me so that they would eventually believe I didn't care about you and leave you alone.

**Rebecca:** Harald. I'm sorry to interrupt. I don't know how to ask you this, but I think it's important, or maybe I'm confused. You said that protecting Memme and Mom gave you a purpose for living when before that I assume you'd been suicidal?

[Harald nods.]

But if you'd committed suicide, wouldn't Memme and Mom have been safe? Weren't they only in danger as long as they were leverage for the authorities to use against you?

**Harald:** The authorities didn't want us committing suicide. So, they threatened our families. We didn't know where you were, and they indicated they did. If we committed suicide, they assured us they'd bring our families into prison to replace us. We couldn't take that chance. Well, some of us couldn't. It wasn't easy. We were almost sure they were bluffing. But what if they weren't?

[Looks at Rebecca. They nod at each other, so Harald continues.]

Little by little, the routine within the prison camp helped the days, weeks, months, years pass. Since no one treated the prisoners' ailments, I began to, with whatever I could find. This also helped keep my mind focused outside of myself, my worries, my self-pity.

Eventually, the camp administrator noticed my work. I thought this was going to be problematic. One day, one of the highest-ranking officers summoned me to his office. This is it, I thought. I'll be sent to solitary confinement for the next two years.

"Can you help my wife with a problem she's having with her stomach?" he asked?

"Yes," I replied.

“I will pick you up at the gate at 4:30. Don’t be late.”

I went with him to see his wife. She was very ill and had been for some time. There was only one doctor in town. He told her the illness would pass. It hadn’t. I had no access to medication, but I told the officer what he needed to find for her if he wanted her to have even the slightest chance of recovery.

He nodded, we went back to the car, drove back to the prison, and that was that.

Two weeks later, the officer came to find me again. His wife had made a full recovery, he said, and he wanted to thank me. And he was going to try to help me – to get me some proper equipment so I could keep treating patients, and (this might take longer) to see if he could secure a quick release for me.

He didn’t get me released early, obviously. Why would they let me leave if I was treating everyone onsite?

After that, my life became a little easier in that I could do what I loved. I did get a small bit of leeway, a tiny reprieve because of my role. Different assistants worked with me over those years. Because they helped me, they seemed to get a bit of extra leeway from the camp officials, too, so I was glad for that.

Over time, I was treating not only prisoners, not only officers and administrators, but also some people from outside the camp, not affiliated with the camp at all, who were coming to the camp so I could treat them. There was a clinic in the town, but I guess the techniques there were not as advanced as what, Aino, you and I had learned in Estonia. So, people soon learned that I could offer better services.

I would have thought the administration wouldn’t want contact between prisoners and civilians. But for some reason they thought this was a great idea and would make them, the administration, look good. So, they encouraged it. After a while, I had quite a regular practice, and about one-quarter of my patients came to me from outside the camp.

One day, about a year before I was scheduled to be released, I was visited by a man from the outskirts of the town who said he was feeling ill. His symptoms were vague, but I gave him a thorough exam. He asked *me* more questions than I asked him. I should have been suspicious – because he obviously was not sick and he was interrogating me – but I wasn’t, because he seemed kind, and I did not feel that I was in danger. After a while, he said he felt much better, thanked me, and left.

I didn’t think more about it.

One week before I was to be released, I was in the infirmary taking inventory. That same man walked in. I recognized him immediately and he walked over, shook my hand and greeted me with a smile.

“Dr. Tuul, do you remember me? I came to you a few months ago complaining of an illness?” he asked.

“Of course, I remember,” I replied.

“Well, I was not actually sick. I came to see what all the fuss was about. You have earned quite a reputation outside these walls. I am looking for a skilled doctor to take over the clinic in town to

serve the people. Obviously, the doctor who is there now is not meeting people's needs if they need to go to a prison to get better service, right?" he said with a wink and a smile.

I was confused. A job offer? For me? In prison?!

Also, I was being released. No one said when exactly or what that would mean, but some men who were released did get to go back home. It's never easy to go home after you've been labeled "enemy of the state." I wasn't sure whether I'd go back to Estonia even if I were allowed to, but I was still hoping I'd have the choice. Did this man know something I didn't know? How could I ask him delicately if he'd gotten approval from the camp administration to offer me a job in the town?

He seemed to be reading my mind, "I can see I've surprised you, so I will leave you to think about it. But don't think too long! It would be a good opportunity for you: a good job, steady income, chance to earn even more of a reputation. I am the new director of the clinic. My daughter, Nadja, is also a doctor.<sup>20</sup> She will also be on staff. With two good doctors, I think we will be able to serve the community very well. You can build a good, peaceful life for yourself here.

"What? Were you thinking you'd be going back somewhere? Do you have anyone, anything to go back to? I don't know anything more than you know. I just went to the camp administration and explained who I am. I told them I heard about you and that I'm looking for a doctor. I asked how much longer you would be here, and they said about a week. And then I came here to talk to you."

My head was spinning with information. Within the space of five minutes, he'd possibly changed the trajectory of my life. I always assumed I would go back to Estonia – or somewhere else. But staying in Siberia? I'd never allowed myself to consider that they might not let me leave.

"I will leave you now. Please call if you have questions. I hope to hear from you. Bye-Bye." And he was gone.

The camp was a prison, not a resort. The administration did not communicate its plans. You just did things when it was time, which meant when the administration said it was time.

Eight days later, after I'd seen the last patient of the day, the camp administrator came in to see me. "Harald, you've done a fine job in here. We're going to miss having you onsite. It's a good thing for everyone that you've decided to stay in Taischet and serve as the district doctor, just like you did in Antsla, Estonia, during the war. Just like your wife, Aino, did when you went to serve in the German military. District doctor here seems like a really great job for you – you will be respected for your skills and be able to use all of them. If you were to go back to Estonia, you wouldn't even be able to practice medicine anymore, since your medical license, matriculated under German rule, is not valued under our Soviet system. We'd allow you to practice here only because we've seen how you work in the prison, and we would vouch for you here. We couldn't do that for you anywhere else. And we'd pay you well here, even though your license isn't valid. Anyway, we haven't decided if we are ready to let your medical talent leave the area."

At least I had my wits about me enough not to mention either of you, but I did manage to say something about my parents, that they were elderly, and who would be taking care of them, and I had been thinking I might have to take care of them. They laughed at that and said my parents would be much happier to know I was well respected and working in Siberia, supporting them from afar doing something they could be proud of rather than sitting next to them on the couch day after day, an unemployed "enemy of the state."

My heart sank. So, even though I would technically be a “free man” in a few days, I felt as trapped as ever. And there was absolutely nothing I could do about it.

Within two weeks, I went from being a prisoner in a labor camp to a doctor at a hospital where people called me “Sir.” I had gone from the bottom of society to the top. My head was spinning. All I knew was I could sleep in my own space. It took time to get used to my new life, but the work kept me very busy and, more importantly, kept my mind busy. And for that I was so grateful.

I did not want to think about my life. What I had lost. The years. The people. Where you were. Where I could have been. What my life could have been if I’d never gotten on that train.

[Harald puts his head in his hands, shakes his head ...]

Living alone in that apartment, all those thoughts came back. The silence brought the thoughts back, and the thoughts were dangerous. So, eventually, I started spending all my time at the clinic. I didn’t eat, because I didn’t want to spend time waiting on the mile-long food lines. I felt I needed to be always at the clinic. I continued at this pace for some time.

The director’s daughter, also a doctor, was my colleague. We worked well as a team when we needed to. I kept to myself otherwise. She was young and kind and helpful, but I distrusted everyone.

She noticed that I wasn’t eating, so she started leaving food on my desk when I wasn’t there. (I knew it was her.) She left a meal every day. I brought it home every night, ate it, washed the dish, and put it back on her desk when she wasn’t there.

Neither of us said anything to each other about the food for six months. I was grateful for her generosity, and more so for the fact that she didn’t need to talk about it or have it acknowledged, at least immediately. It took time for me to figure out how to handle it. For me, it was about trust and making sure she wasn’t trying to manipulate me. Maybe she was trying to, but I was hungry, so I was going to eat those meals. In the meantime, we continued to work together on patients, never once mentioning the meals.

After about six months, I was putting the clean dishes into her locker when she came into the room, startling me. I stood up, looked her in the eye, bowed, then said, “Thank you for the meals you’ve been providing. You no longer need to bring them.” And I walked out of the room. I was glad it was out in the open, but disappointed that I blurted out that she should stop bringing the meals. And then I had to ask myself: Was I disappointed about the food? Or was I disappointed because that would end our connection? Or a connection – to someone, anyone?

And then, of course, I felt terribly guilty because of you. I just couldn’t find any place in the world, in myself, where I felt at ease. I fell into a two-week period of very dark despair and depression, which led to a month-long delirious illness. I had a high fever, couldn’t get out of bed, or into the clinic to see patients.

So again, Nadja came to my aid.

She covered all of the patients in the clinic and then came to check on me and bring me food every evening.

Because of my helpless state, I had no choice but to learn to depend on her. Little by little, we started to talk about our lives. Apparently, in the delirium of my fevers, I talked about you, Aino, and you, Mall. So, later when I was well again, she started to ask me about the life I left behind.

She shared with me that she was born in Siberia, but her parents weren't. They ended up in Siberia after being deported from their homeland, so she understood a bit of what it meant to feel like a stranger in a strange land ripped from family, alone ...

Talking to her, I realized how desperately I missed companionship – just simple conversation with another human being without having to think about every word that comes out of my mouth or using coded language or keeping everything inside to keep everyone I love safe. She was a good listener. I regret to say that our friendship in those early days was very one-sided. There wasn't much I could do for her, but she was a very good friend to me when I needed one. Just learning how to function as a human being outside of prison was challenging for me.

[Long pause, as Harald puts his head in his hands and scratches his head, as if to wake up, get something out of his brain. Then he looks up at Aino. Their eyes lock.]

**Harald:** That is how Nadja came into my life, and we became friends. And we were friends, good friends, for many years. She knew that my heart was *with* you, and *in* Estonia. I still had my mission, which was to protect you two and my parents at all costs. My life, my future meant nothing to me. So, I wasn't even contemplating a future. My only goal was getting through each day and being alert for signs of danger for any of you. And being on the lookout for any sign that I might be free to go home, though I wasn't sure what that would look like, and I had no one to ask.

I got permission from the authorities to travel home to visit my parents for the first time in 1953. They agreed to give me permission for me to *visit*, but said they still needed me back because I was such a fine doctor and “wouldn't it be terrible for me to go back to Estonia as an “enemy of the state” with no work and bring shame to my family with no job and have my parents be kicked out of their home and possibly deported to Siberia because of their association with me. And wouldn't it be a shame for the Soviet supporters in New York to call, Aino, your hospital and tell your boss that your husband is a Soviet spy who was captured and sent to Siberia. So, I found out, even before I visited Estonia for the first time and saw your aunt and she told me she'd heard from you, that you were alive and living and working in New York City. I heard about you before that. From them. I didn't know at the time that they were telling the truth, but I was afraid they were.

So that confirmed, once again, that I was not, and would likely never be, a free man. Because they knew where you were, what you were doing, and they made sure I knew they knew. And that they could get to you if they wanted to. If I didn't do what they told me to.

But I was resigned to that. It was ok with me, as long as I had the power to keep you and my parents safe. If my being in Siberia kept you safe, then I was ok staying in Siberia. I left you at that train station and I haven't forgiven myself for that – leaving you alone with our baby to flee the Russians. At least this was something I could do to protect you.

Of course, I couldn't explain that to you or anyone else in letters. I couldn't risk anyone hearing or reading the truth. If the authorities got hold of the truth, it would be used against me.

As for Nadja, except for the time when I was sick and delirious with fever and told her about my life and what I'd lost, I didn't talk to her anymore about you. I didn't want to risk her knowing anything that might put her – or my plan – in jeopardy. No one could know.

[Long silence as we all try to absorb the enormity of all Harald has just told us and how it fits (or doesn't) with the narrative we've carried for decades.]

**Aino:** [Quietly] What happened when I filed the petition in 1959<sup>21</sup> to try to bring you to the U.S. – when your family got so upset with me? That is when I cut everything off with you.

[Harald shifts in his chair, stands up, walks out away from the circle into what is starting to become darkness. He stands with his back toward us for a few moments, takes a deep breath, turns around, and with a look of resolve, walks back towards us and sits back down. He reaches over to grab Aino's hand and gently squeezes it. He looks into her eyes as if to say, are you ready? She nods.]

**Harald:** For several years, life was quiet, and I had gotten back into a semi-peaceful state. Work was busy, which kept my mind occupied, and I felt fulfilled. The director appreciated my work, and we had developed a good relationship over time. Nadja and I evolved into an effective team at the clinic, and our friendship continued to grow as well. We were simply close friends. But because she was young and not married, and because we worked together and we worked long hours, and because she often still brought meals over for me or we ate together, and because the town was small – rumors circulated about us.

Nadja was much younger than me, so I encouraged her (often reminded her) to spend time with people her own age. I worried a little bit that she felt things for me that I didn't for her. But there wasn't much more I could do, since we worked together and *were* together so many hours of the day.

And, honestly, the thought did occur to me that if there were rumors about me and Nadja, maybe that was not a bad thing, because it would help me achieve my goal of protecting you.

[Seeing the confused looks on our faces, Harald explained.]

**Harald:** If the authorities thought I was now involved with someone in Siberia, they would assume that you were no longer a point of leverage for me. That would mean you would be safe.

Everything was going along fine, until one day when the director of the clinic, Nadja's father, called me to his office. He opened the door and looked at me strangely. When I stepped into his office, I could see why. Three other men were inside: the administrator of the labor camp, along with two huge men I didn't know – and didn't care to know.

The clinic director started to speak, "Uh, Harald, I called you in—"

"Harald!" the labor camp administrator interrupted. "Do you know why we're here?"

I didn't, of course, so I said as much.

The labor camp administrator handed me a piece of paper. I couldn't understand it except that I knew it was in English and I saw my name and your name [he says while looking at Aino] and "Petition" and "United States" and "Reunification". There were some words that jumped out at me and at the bottom I saw your beautiful signature in your handwriting that I immediately recognized, and I wanted to hold that paper and keep it, because I knew you had touched it – [His words fade.]

But I quickly got hold of my emotions and looked around the room and realized everyone was staring at me curiously, so I thrust the paper back into his hands and said, "No, I have no idea what this is. I don't read or speak English. Why am I here? I see my name. I see my *ex-wife's* name. Other than that, I don't understand."

[Harald looks at Aino intently.] Oh, Aino, how it pained me to say that, “ex-wife.” But I needed him to hear me being very casual and talking about you as someone from my past.

“EX-wife?!” the camp administrator asked? “Are you DIVORCED?”

“Well, not technically,” I said, shrugging my shoulders and trying to sound as nonchalant as I could. But I haven’t seen or spoken to her in more than ... 15 years, so I can’t exactly consider her my *wife*, can I?”

Truly, Aino, my heart was splitting with each word. But he smirked, so I could see that it was working.

“Sir,” I turned to the clinic director, again, to feign disinterest in this meeting, “I have several ill patients I need to attend to. Is there something else you need from me?”

The clinic director looked at the camp administrator, who spoke slowly, deliberately, with a very self-satisfied look on his face. My blood was boiling, but I kept my face calm.

He spoke so smugly when he said, “I just came over to bring you this letter and to see if you’d be interested in moving to the United States to join your wife and daughter there. To start a new life with them. It seems they want you there, even after all this time.

“It seems President Nixon is looking for some ‘good will’ between nations. You’ve been such a success here: Prisoner turns Doctor and all that, so I was wondering if we should send you there as our Good Will Ambassador?”

I was silent.

I came so close to yelling, “Yes, I want to go! I miss them desperately. They are all I think about! I’ll do anything you want; I don’t care! If I must clean toilets, just please send me.”

But I didn’t say that. I bit my tongue and made myself breathe.

Thank God.

Because then he said, “Of course our good will ambassador would be our inside man to show *us* ‘good will’ *wherever* and *whenever* we need it.” He could barely contain his sneer. His two thugs laughed on cue for him.

And of course, their leverage to get me do what they wanted would have been the two of you.

I shrugged and said, “Ok if I go now?”

They all laughed and waved me out.

I believe the authorities also wrote a threatening note to my parents about prison – for me, for them.<sup>22</sup> But my job was to send you a letter that would convince the censors reading my letters that what I had said in that meeting about not really caring about you anymore was how I really felt.<sup>23</sup>

**Aino:** I never got that letter. Leo never gave it to me. He just told me everyone was upset and afraid for you – that you could go back to prison. So, I cancelled the petition and told everyone



that I was done trying to reconcile with you. And I never wrote to you again or talked to your brother about you.<sup>24</sup>

**Rebecca:** Harald, we're not sure why, but Leo held on to some of the letters you sent him, letters that you had intended for Mom and Memme. He never sent those letters on to Mom and Memme. We found them among his boxes in 2014, many years after he'd died. And then there was one letter that Leo wrote to you, where he is telling you how Mom and Memme are angry with you about "how you're living your life." Reading that, I assume he is talking about Nadja? But Mom and Memme didn't know about Nadja, because the family didn't tell them. So, Leo was mad about it, but I guess he couldn't say he was? Or maybe he thought it would be more hurtful for you to think that Memme and Mom were mad about it. We don't understand what Leo was thinking or how he could be so cruel to you, or to Mom and Memme, by withholding the letters from them. Do you know why he would have done this? Did you two not get along?

**Harald:** [Obviously shocked by what he has just learned, he takes a minute to compose his thoughts.]

Leo and I were always very different, but we respected each other as brothers. I was disappointed that he left the country when so many of us stayed to fight. Obviously now I regret leaving, but I had a hard time imagining that the oldest brother ran away while the younger two stayed to fight. I would never have imagined he would betray me in the ways you have just said. I trusted that he would take care of my family in my absence.

**Rebecca:** In that letter you write to Leo about Mom and Memme supposedly being mad at you, you say that you are "not as heartless as you seem." What did you mean by that?

**Harald:** Just this – my "heartlessness" was all an illusion to protect the ones I loved most in the world.

[Long pause.]

**Rebecca:** Harald, at some point, you and Nadja were more than friends. You had your son, Juri, in 1968.

**Harald:** Yes, well I had done such a great job of convincing everyone that I was disinterested in my wife and daughter that, as a result, I had no more access to them – even through the aunts, my aunt and Aino's aunt – because everyone thought I was living with Nadja, which I was not yet at that time. I hadn't really thought that through, but of course it had to be that way. I basically begged to keep correspondence going, but that didn't work. And then I insisted that my family send to me anything, photos, letters that came from the two of you.

In Siberia at that time, Nadja's career was Number 1 in her life, and I was Number 2. Aino, you sent word through the family around that time that I should re-marry, so I assumed you were getting ready to marry. Mall, you had married and were starting your family. The authorities granted me permission every year or every other year to *visit* Estonia, but still no one mentioned that I could move back.

At one point, Nadja came to me, sat me down, and said, "Harald, we have been such good friends to each other these 20 or so years. We have been work partners and supported each other in our lives. I respect you. You respect me. I know you had a great love, and I will never be that for you. I have always wanted a child, and I know you are a good man. Maybe out of all this brokenness, we can create some tiny corner of beauty and joy for ourselves. I know it's not a very

romantic proposition, but I am a practical person. Life here is too hard to walk alone. Let's walk the rest of it together. You don't have to answer me now. Just think about it."

We didn't talk about it again for two years. To her credit, she never mentioned it. One day, I decided I did not want to be alone one more day. Juri was born the following year. And he did bring me joy – I didn't believe I would ever laugh again, but I did.

Often, when I was laughing at something he did, like his first steps or his first words, throwing a ball or playing an instrument – my first reaction was to smile or clap. But then a split second later, my heart would sink and your little face, Mallekene, would flash before my eyes. A wave of grief would pass through me that I had missed that moment with you. Sometimes the moment passed quickly, but often it lingered awhile and I couldn't shake it easily.

Those precious moments with Juri were bittersweet. I think I needed to walk through that grief, but it was hard on Juri to always see those complex emotions like a film projected on my face. When he was about six years old, I told him about you – about how I was separated from the two of you during the war. I explained that he had a sister, I showed him photographs, the ones you had sent me. He asked a lot of questions. I felt relief that it was out in the open –

[There is a pause for a few moments, then suddenly Mall blurts out the following as if she'd been holding back but finally got up the courage and didn't want to wait a second longer or she'd lose it again.]

**Mall:** Why didn't you come to meet me in Leningrad in 1975 when Leevi and I came there to try to meet you? I sent word through the family with plenty of notice for you to plan, letting you know that I would be there. We stayed in the hotel for three days. We took Sandra out every day sightseeing—she was eight years old. And every evening we would return to the hotel with such anticipation, thinking this was going to be the day when you left me a note saying where and when I could meet you.

But every evening, I was disappointed.<sup>25</sup>

Why didn't you come?

[Mall's voice is shaking by this point.]

Were you afraid about me finding out about Juri?

[The pain her questions cause is evident on Harald's face. He stands up, walks over to Mall's spot and kneels facing her, placing his hands on her knees and bowing his head.]

**Harald:** Mall, please forgive me.

For all my talk earlier about staying in Siberia to protect the two of you and my parents – all of that is true. So, I feel like that part I can explain, and you can understand.

What I cannot explain in a way that is sufficient is why I couldn't be content to live the rest of my days alone, satisfied with the fact that my staying there kept you safe. In the end, I had to admit that if I was going to survive there – and it was becoming clear that I was never going to get permission to leave Siberia – then I needed the comfort of others. And in this case, *others* meant first Nadja and then Juri.

But my not coming to Leningrad in 1975 was *not* about hiding Juri. We had planned that we were all going to come and meet you and tell you everything. Nadja supported the idea, and we purchased the tickets. The three of us were planning to come and, depending on how my first meeting with you went, maybe Juri<sup>26</sup> would join us next, and then hopefully Nadja also.

But once again, one week before we were to leave – three weeks before we were going to meet you, because it takes two weeks to travel by train from Siberia to Leningrad – the clinic director, Nadja’s father, called me to his office. This time I knew by the tone of his voice something was wrong. When he opened the door, his warning look told me all I needed to know to prepare myself.

The labor camp administrator (a different one this time, but they are all the same) started in right away, no time for niceties, “So, you are going to reunite with your long-lost daughter in Leningrad? How charrmmmmingggggg!” He drew out the last word in a sickly-sweet way. “And you’re going to introduce her to her half-brother? Oh hee-hee, hee-hee, won’t that be interesting, huh? Finally airing family secrets, how exciting! Hee-hee, hee-hee.”

My stomach was in a knot. The rage inside of me from years of this torment was moving from my toes upward toward my clenched fists.

“Oh, my goodness, does introducing them seem like a wise idea?! What if something were to happen to your daughter? Or to your beautiful blond American granddaughter after they had just finally met you? We wouldn’t want an international incident on our hands! Oh no! hee-hee, hee-hee.”

I thought I might vomit right there. He knew about Sandra, what she looked like. He was threatening you, her. I didn’t think they would actually *do* anything. I was sure it was just a scare tactic, right? But if it was, why would they go to all that trouble to just bluff?

Why did they care so much about what I did, and who I saw? My head was spinning. It didn’t make sense. All those years of sacrifice and it could all blow up in my face in one trip.

I didn’t say anything to him. I walked out of the office and could hear him cackling as I walked all the way down the hall.

I worked the rest of my shift at the clinic, but I was numb.

I walked home.

I told Nadja what happened, with as much detail as possible, as calmly as I could.

It was clear that we could not go to Leningrad.

It was also clear that we could give *you* no indication. Of any of it.

*Not* that I wasn’t coming,

*Not* that you were in danger.

If you didn’t know anything, you would be safe.<sup>27</sup>

[Mall leans down and almost covers her hands with her eyes, but her eyes are raised, still looking at him.]

**Harald:** [Looks at Mall, pauses, hesitates to continue, but then does, slowly.]

I knew for certain that it was *me* they were after – it was *me* they were trying to keep from going. So *please* hear me, listen carefully. They didn't *actually* care about you or Sandra. They were *using* you to control me. So, I knew for certain that if I stayed in Siberia – which of course they were watching for, so they would know – then no danger would come to you.

**Mall:** [Slowly, trying to control her emotions.] But you are saying that they knew, *even before* we left the U.S., what Sandra looked like and what our plans were? OK, so they read the letter to the family and knew our plans, but how would they know her name, what she *looked* like?!

**Harald:** [Sounds like even he is unconvinced by what he is saying.] Probably from other letters or a photo of her you sent to the family that the censors read earlier.

**Mall:** Or they were watching us in the U.S.?

**Harald:** [Slowly, quietly, nodding.] Yes, it's possible.

[Aino is crying.]

**Aino:** I thought we were safe. I left everything, everyone, crossed the world to get away, but they were even in the United States – where?!

**Harald:** I don't know that. What I'm saying is that they made it *seem* to us that they were everywhere, so we could not be sure our loved ones were safe anywhere in the world. They wanted us to think they could reach you anywhere, so we'd do what they said. There was no way for me to know for sure. And no other way for me to protect you. I had failed you in every other way. [Puts his head back down in his hands.]

[No one moves. Many minutes pass.]

**Harald:** [Lifts his head.] I hadn't realized how excited I'd allowed myself to become over the thought of seeing you – of course, nervous too, but mostly *so* excited – until they ripped even that away from me.

I'm ashamed to say I handled it badly.

I went to a very dark place.

For a very long time.

Nadja and Juri, who was only eight years old at the time, couldn't reach me. They tried many times and many ways. I knew I was hurting them, but I just couldn't find my way back. I couldn't see the point of living a life over which I had no control. I was a marionette controlled by a sadistic puppet master for 30 years. I just wanted to cut the strings. I felt that if I ended it, at least I would control *that*, and *take control away* from them.

I continued to go to work every day – somehow, I was able to do that. Some people in that state can't get out of bed. I did the opposite. I escaped into my work, barely coming home at all. I was like that for about a year, hanging on just by a thread.

I don't know why or how, but the fog finally began to clear. Nadja was still there, and we were able to repair our relationship. She had always been very patient and kind to me and was especially so then. But unfortunately, that year damaged my relationship with Juri. No matter what I tried, he continued to keep his distance from me. He was so young when it happened, so I thought things would improve over time. But they didn't.

Before this, Juri was full of laughter and joy, and we were very close. But afterward, he was so angry. I tried to talk to him, but I couldn't get through. In his teenage years, he got into quite a few fights at school. When I tried to talk to him about that, he'd yell or walk away, or tell me a real father doesn't abandon his child, so why should he listen to me.

When he was young, before this happened, he talked about becoming a doctor, like his mother and me. He basically grew up at the clinic, since his grandfather was there, too. He would come to the clinic straight from school. He knew everyone, and everyone loved him. He would often pretend to treat the patients and come into my office to report on how Mr. So-in-so was doing on this medication or tell me how I should change the treatment for Mrs. You-know-who since Juri had made a new discovery in that area of medicine. He was so excited.

[Harald is staring out into the darkness, seemingly lost in his memories. Eventually coming back to the present, he continues.]

But after I came back to them, he declared that he hated medicine, he never came back to the clinic, and instead he started to pursue music and joined a band. It was not what I wanted for him, but I tried to be supportive. It didn't take long for me to see that he actually was very gifted musically –

[He looks excitedly at Mall]

– which is amazing, Mall, since you are, too.

[Harald smiles at Mall, and she smiles back.]

**Harald:** He hated when I came to see his band play. He would stop playing *in the middle of a song* if he saw me – he'd simply walk right off the stage. He wouldn't go back on until I left.

This was hard on Nadja, to be caught between us like that.

It was my fault, so I stepped back, gave her space to be with him.

That was probably also bad, but I didn't know what else to do. He pulled further and further away from me.

When he was little, he loved taking the train to visit my parents in Estonia. And he loved being on the farm. After my dark period, though, he said he hated Estonia and everything there and he didn't ever want to go back. I know he didn't mean it – he just hated me and everything that had anything to do with me.

So, I had broken that, too. That relationship.

[Harald wrings his hands and looks at Mall.]

What a father, eh? Can't keep one child safe and then I run the other one off with my self-pity.

[Rubs his chin and looks off into the distance.]

In the end, Nadja and I did find peace. And she and Juri were at peace. He was actually *very* loving toward her. And when he didn't realize I was in the apartment, I could hear him teasing her or laughing with her. So, I knew my joyful little guy was still in there somewhere. *He* wasn't broken, it was just our relationship that was broken. And I would just have to live with that.

Nadja was all I had left in the world. In our early years together, I kept most things from her. But in the end, I told her everything. My heart just couldn't keep secrets any longer. I didn't have the strength.

I hadn't realized that she had been working with officials for a long time on my behalf to get my name cleared, so I could just live in peace. She started the process when I descended into darkness – since she couldn't help me any other way. She was afraid I'd commit suicide if the pressure on me continued, so she went to try to get me declared "rehabilitated." That way my case would be closed, they would stop "monitoring" me, and I could live the rest of my days freely, quietly.

And she finally succeeded, although it took many years. So. I am officially "rehabilitated," whatever that means. I'm sure *they* think it means I believe their nonsense. I don't care what they think, as long as they leave me in peace. Which they do.

This is why I am able to be here, at Vetka, for as long as I want. Or even forever. This is how I am able, finally, to be here. With you.

[The group sits silently for a few minutes.]

**Rebecca:** Does anyone else want to ask or say anything?

**Aino:** Well, I told Harald that you both know what happened that night – the one I don't remember very well. We never spoke about it, it came back to me, so it seems like if we're talking about things that we've been carrying all these years, this is something we should discuss.

**Rebecca:** I support that, Memme.

**Harald:** Yes, I agree, too. Please go ahead.

**Aino:** Well, we never spoke about it.

**Harald:** No.

**Aino:** We just pretended it never happened until I realized I was pregnant.

[Harald nods his head and lowers it, holding his head in his hands for a few moments. Then he raises it to look Aino in the eye.]

**Harald:** I'm so sorry for the way things happened that night. It's just –

**Aino:** For the *way* things happened? Harald, I don't remember *exactly* what happened. It's mostly – not all, but mostly blank. I just know that you *raped me*.

[The last two words seem to ring out. Harald looks and feels like someone has just punched him. He looks confused. She says it in Estonian, thinking he didn't understand.]

Sina vägistasid mind.

[After a few minutes, which he needs to gather himself, he responds.]

**Harald:** *Raped* you?

**Aino:** Yes, Harald.

**Harald:** I, we, we were –

**Aino:** We were what? We had just started—we weren't even courting yet officially. You had just finally started showing an interest in me. Prior to that, I hadn't even seen you with other women and I was having fun with my group of friends. You and I were just starting. You called me that night from that party and said you weren't having fun and asked if you could stop by afterward to visit. I was flattered that you were thinking of me while you were at a party with other people. I was stupid and should have realized—what? You were drinking and that was your intention --to come over and do --

**Harald:** No, no, no – [He says quietly, shaking his head.]

**Aino:** What, then? [She is whispering, barely audible.]

**Harald:** I called you from the party exactly for the reason I said. I was surrounded by people, and I didn't want to talk to any of them. None of them were interesting. I kept thinking about you and how much nicer it would be to be sitting talking to you. We hadn't spent much time alone together yet. But that evening with all of those people around, it became very clear to me that you were the person I wanted to be spending my time with. I don't know why it took me so long to realize that or pay attention, but I had been so focused on my studies up to that point. It just hit me suddenly, so I called you to see if you were awake and to ask if I could stop by. My intention was just to come and sit with you and talk with you.

After I hung up, I was very excited, but also nervous. So, I had a few drinks to calm me down a bit. Aino, I don't really understand myself what happened that night, except that I need you to understand a few things: I had never been with anyone before that, my feelings for you were stronger than I had realized, and I felt so much shame once I saw your face that I left your apartment crying and practically running and truly thought we'd never speak again. When you saw me in class the following Monday, you spoke to me and behaved as though nothing had happened. I was shocked and confused that you were even speaking to me. I didn't know what to do or say. I couldn't make sense of what had happened and was terrified to ask you. I was a coward.

Then a few weeks later, you told me you were pregnant, and you looked at me with such fear and emotion. You were actually looking to me for help, for answers. I had been so certain that awful night that I'd destroyed everything, any chance with you, yet here you were in front of me asking me what we were going to do. For me the answer was clear, but would it be for you? When I said to you that the answer was simple and that we'd get married, and then I saw the relief in your eyes, I convinced myself that somehow, I must have misinterpreted what had happened that night and that everything was, or at least would be, ok. You and I would be together, which is what I had hoped for, and we were going to have a child—a little earlier than expected maybe, but wonderful, nonetheless. Well, and then that changed unexpectedly, too, in the end.

**Aino:** Yes, Thank God.

**Harald:** What?

**Aino:** Yes, I was so relieved when I had the miscarriage.

**Harald:** But we were already married when you had the miscarriage. We were going to be a family. I don't understand why you were relieved.

**Aino:** I didn't care. It was such a burden for me. I was glad God removed it for me. That pregnancy. The way it happened. My fear. The fact that I couldn't talk to anyone about it. I had no one. I felt so alone. It was such a huge burden for me to carry. For my heart. I was relieved when God took away the burden of that pregnancy. But we were married, and that was not something to be undone.

**Harald:** So, if you had not gotten pregnant, you wouldn't have married me?

**Aino:** We got married because I was pregnant. Once we were married, I was determined to make the marriage work. If that night had not happened, we might have gotten together at some point, but we didn't have the chance to see if that would have happened. Our courtship had just started. Anyway, then the war came and – times were so different then. I believe we had a good marriage, short as it was. I believe we were happy. We weren't together for very long, because of the circumstances of the war – you had to serve in the Army – but I believe I loved you quite deeply. And then of course a couple years later, we had our baby Mall and then our family was complete.

**Harald:** Yes, our Mallekene.

**Aino:** So, I thought *you* were avoiding speaking about that night, and you thought *I* was avoiding speaking about it?

**Harald:** Anu, can you ever forgive me? For what I did to you that night. For not talking to you about it. For not begging your forgiveness in that moment and all the moments since. You had lost your father and brother just a few months earlier and still didn't know what had happened to them. You were living all alone in that apartment, because your mother was living in Tallinn. So, you were alone, as you say. And instead of supporting you, protecting you, I said I cared for you, and I hurt you most of all. I have thought many times over the years that perhaps everything I suffered in Siberia was punishment for the hurt I caused you.

[Aino stares at Harald but says nothing.]

**Harald:** [Eyes cast downward.] You must've wondered the same thing –

**Aino:** [Takes a deep breath and speaks slowly.] Not at the time – After we were separated, for so long I was so desperate to find you and be with you that I walked around like a ghost, a shell of myself. The only reason I could keep moving one foot in front of the other was my bigger sense of desperation to keep Mall out of the Russians' hands. If it were for me alone, I would have given up and laid down many times. But I could not let her fate be determined by those monsters.

For her sake, I also tried to be strong and put on a strong face in front of her. But when I was alone, I cried often. I missed your companionship, I was afraid – for you, for us. I didn't know where to go, what to do. Mother was no help, she just led me lead. I felt such a burden, such responsibility, not just for Mall, but for the whole group. Nanny Olga insisted on coming with us, since she had no family. But she was 65 years old at the time, so I worried about her traveling



with us and about having five people to care for when I didn't even know where we were going. It was so much more complicated to travel with five people than it would have been with just me and the baby.

**Harald:** Yes, but safer, too.

**Aino:** Yes, true. That is true. And I could not have done it alone. God knew what I needed. But the point is, what happened that night, because of everything that was happening around us, in the war and in the U.S. as we were each trying to get to safety and keep track of each other – it's not that I forgot about it, but I put it away somewhere. My only feelings, my only concern was getting us back together once the war separated us. For 20 years, I kept that hope alive. I worked hard, cried to myself, and continued to think about how to get you to the United States.

When I heard about the U.S. President going to the Soviet Union around 1960 to repair relations and try to get some prisoners released from Siberia, I thought this was surely our chance. So, I found a lawyer who would help me petition the government and paid him a deposit for the work.

But before I could even finish, your brother, Leo, was very harsh with me and told me how upset the family was and how much it scared them for anything to be done with the Soviet government in relation to you that might put you in danger again. I didn't hear anything directly from you, which surprised me. But at that point – well, I'd been so excited, Harald. I really thought after so many years of pain and tears and loneliness and most of all prayer, that finally God had maybe answered one. I was crushed. Heartbroken.

And it was at that point, around 1960, that I cut off all contact, and said I was completely done. Of course, I encouraged Mall to continue to write to you and I continued to speak well of you. She didn't know anything about the extent of my disappointment. But I had to close the door – and my heart – completely to you, to correspondence, to any hope of a future with you. It felt like a raw wound that festered. I couldn't continue that way any longer. So, I told my aunt not to send me any more letters, no matter what you said. And she honored that.

I was not angry with you. Just heartbroken for a life I'd lost and would never have again. And heartbroken for Mall, who really struggled when she was younger as the only child in the neighborhood without a father. I could see her face change when neighborhood children would innocently ask why her father was never around or say gosh, your dad works a lot, and then her face would contort as if she tried to think of something to say or how she could quickly change the subject. She used to even pretend that our Estonian family friends' son Jack was her brother, and that he and her dad lived in a separate house – I can't remember what her explanation was for that. When her girlfriends came to me to tattle on her about lying about Jack being her brother, I saw the pained look on her face and caught on quickly to what had happened. I said something like, "Oh, girls, don't you know that she was just teasing you?! She likes to joke around about Jack! Isn't she funny?"

So, I wasn't angry. Just sad. Mall kept visiting your brother, Leo, in Canada, but I couldn't go any more. It was too painful. Mall continued her visits to Canada. She kept going up there all throughout her marriage, even as her kids grew up. Since Leo and Juta never had children and grandchildren of their own, I guess Leo took on yours as his own.

So, I guess that's why I cannot figure this out, no matter how many times I go over and over and over it in my mind or in conversation with Rebecca and Mall. All these years I am desperately missing you, my husband, and our family – focused on the love we shared and how to restore that, reunite us. I worried about you, tried to find out what I could about you, asked my aunt to help you, send you and your family whatever I could – I always wished I could do more.

So, I just cannot understand it.

Why did Mall have to hear about Nadja and Juri from Jutta's mother? Why didn't you just tell me? I just cannot get it through my head – how I loved you so much and thought about you for so many years, and it felt like you didn't really think about me at all and just found someone close by who could comfort you, be by your side.

[Aino is silent. She looks at Harald. He is silent.]

You asked me earlier, did I only marry you because I was pregnant? I'll ask you the same question: Did you marry me just because I was pregnant, but really not care that much for me?

**Harald:** No, no. [He shakes his head.] I cared for you long before we officially started courting. I would have married you whether or not you were pregnant. I cared very deeply for you. I had since our first years studying together. I did try to write to you, but as I explained to you earlier, it would have been impossible for me to explain the situation honestly, clearly.

**Aino:** Yes, but I guess back to your very first question about whether I thought you deserved what happened to you –

That betrayal – the discovery of your wife and child many years after the fact and then realizing that they were perhaps the reason you didn't want to come to the United States – I had never heard from you about my petition to bring you here. I'd only heard from Leo. So, I had no idea why or if you hadn't wanted me to go through with it. I had only known *your family* was terrified – for you and for themselves.

But learning about Nadja and Juri, and having *not* heard from you, I had to fill in the blanks for myself and what I came up with was this: I was a fool who was still in love with a man I'd lost decades earlier. That man had moved on and was in love with someone else and didn't even have the decency to tell us – his wife and daughter – that he'd started another family that he cared for more and chose to stay with.

I felt I'd been taken for a fool.

That pain is what stayed with me all those years, decades. And even though I never told her and tried to keep it from Mall, I think she knew. I think she was protective of me. I felt guilty that she seemed to be angry at you. I always tried to talk respectfully about you to her and our grandchildren. But I couldn't really help that I couldn't hide my pain.

[Harald is silent, but this is obviously difficult for him to hear.]

When I met my second husband, Ilmar, in 1976, by some miracle I was able to put even that behind me. For 37 blissful years, I forgot about all of it and lived a peaceful, wonderful life with him. I thank God for the gift Ilmar was to my life.

When Ilmar got sick in 2012–2013, and Rebecca and I started working on my memoir and then recording my stories, she became very curious about you and asked so many questions. Then all of the memories – and pain – I'd locked away for so long came flooding back.

[Rebecca grabs Aino's hand and squeezes it.]

**Rebecca:** I'm so sorry, Memme. I was selfish. I shouldn't have pushed and asked you all of those questions.

[Aino looks at Rebecca, shakes her head and smiles, squeezing her hand back.]

**Aino:** I didn't handle well the combination of losing Ilmar and the return of these memories. This betrayal – you with Nadja and Juri, rejecting me and Mall – is the one I could not reconcile. And then as time went on, and Rebecca and I dug deeper and deeper, the memories of the rape came back, too – not completely, but the chain of events surrounding it. I did sometimes wonder if God had punished you for what you'd done. This thought tormented me – on top of everything else. For a long time, I was determined not to ever tell anyone. I didn't know how I would. I thought Mall would hate me.

But the memories just kept coming and coming. I told Rebecca there was something else, but that I couldn't tell her. She was worried about me and encouraged me to tell someone – a pastor or a counselor. I told my doctor, which helped tremendously. But in the end, I did tell Rebecca. We'd become very close over the years we'd been working on the project and talked about many personal things. I couldn't keep it from her anymore. I'd been honest about everything else. It was too much work to keep silent about it any longer.

Rebecca spent so many years defending you, trying to convince me that you loved me no matter how many times I showed her how cold you were in your letters. She did all kinds of research into Soviet times and Soviet tactics. She would find examples of people who'd been made to marry just so they would stay in Siberia. She would come up with excuses for why you might have done what you did or said what you said. I think she built up quite a fantasy of you in her head.

So, when I told Rebecca, I think she could not process it at first. But she said she believed me. She said she supported me, but I think saying that was difficult for her. I think she was really confused for a while, and I don't think she could understand how I could love you so much after you'd done that to me.

[Aino looks at Rebecca. Rebecca nods and bites her lip.]

I was petrified, paralyzed about telling Mall. I was afraid she would hate me, think I was lying, resent me for ruining the image she had of you. I'm not sure if she believes me. But I think she loves me. And for now, that is enough.

[Aino looks at Mall. Mall grabs her hand and nods.]

[Everyone is silent for several. Long. Minutes. Aino and Harald look at each other. They nod, seeming to come to some kind of understanding. Harald remains silent and Aino speaks.]

**Aino:** Mall, Rebecca, do either of you want to say anything, ask anything, about this or anything else? To me or Harald? You have been completely silent, but I know you must have a lot of questions or thoughts.

[Rebecca looks at Mall.]

**Mall:** No. Well, I guess up until now, because we hadn't heard Harald and his side of this, I was trying to be supportive of you Memme but also trying to understand. And because of the gap in your memory, I just wondered—well--

[Long pause.]

I found it difficult to make a judgement about such a-- strong accusation when I felt like there were missing pieces. I think maybe you thought I didn't believe you, but it wasn't that. It was hard for me jump to condemn him when you were suddenly showing me such a completely different picture of him than you'd ever shown me before. That's what I couldn't understand. I think I'm starting to now. I'm glad that you have the opportunity to say what you need to say now.

**Rebecca:** [Rebecca looks around and then down at her hands and sighs. She looks at Harald.]

I have a lot to say. I know none of you are going to like it. But it's my truth. And you asked.

Memme and I are closer than most grandmother and granddaughters and have shared more, I think. I feel very protective of her. I also have learned from her how complex life is and that nothing is simple when it comes to the heart. I wish I could say that I've come to conclusions about my feelings for you, Harald. I just cannot understand it. I cannot reconcile what you did with the person I was getting excited to start to know when Memme and I started talking about you –

I almost quit this project because of you. After she told me. I was so upset and confused. I didn't want to hear anything else about you.

I just couldn't understand. After I read your diary the first time, I thought you kind of sounded like me in the way you wrote about things.

[Rebecca looks at Harald.]

I know, it sounds stupid. I thought maybe if I had grown up knowing you, I would have related to you – like maybe we would have had a special relationship. You had dark hair like me (when everyone else in the family was blonde). You were a middle child like me. And from the way Memme described you in medical school, you seemed quiet, reserved, shy. Like me. Memme was right that I'd built up this fantasy in my mind about how you might have been as a grandfather in my life. It's ridiculous that I was upset about that. I loved my grandparents anyway, it's not like I was missing out. But somehow, I really felt like I would have identified with you in particular.

[Harald listens intently.]

Even more ridiculous, I somehow thought you were the key to my having had a better understanding of men and relationships. I think that is why I was always so adamant about sticking up for you when Memme was trying to tell me how you didn't love her. My relationships didn't work out. I knew yours and Memme's didn't, but I was somehow convinced that that **wasn't** because you didn't want it to. I had to believe that it was outside forces that kept you apart. That if it had been up to you, you **would** have gotten back together. That is the most ridiculous part of all of this. I was focused on the fantasy of you wanting to be back together with her after you were married, and the war had separated you. But **before** any of that, you did this to her. **Before** you were even married, you did this to her. **Before** the big betrayal (as I knew it), you did this to her.

It seemed like the world turned upside down. That's how it felt. Like nothing made sense. Nothing about the five prior years of what I'd learned working with Memme made any sense.

I couldn't understand how a person who was so self-reflective, intelligent, and had been described to me all my life as 'intelligent, 'respectful,' a 'mediator' could do something like that. In your diary, you criticize the other men at the internment camp who go around drinking and

running around with women. You said you didn't do any of that. Meanwhile, you did this to Memme. I just couldn't understand it.

But the worst, the unforgivable part for me was that you knew that just a few months before you did this to her, her father and brother had disappeared. She knew nothing about their whereabouts. I don't even know how she was surviving day to day, doing her residency, waking up, going to the hospital, going through her day not knowing where they were. She was living alone. You and she were supposedly interested in each other, so you cared for her. You should have been protecting her.

[Rebecca covers her head with her hands. There is a long pause before she continues.]

So – that's how I felt. That's how I still feel when I think about it. But then I think about everything else: what happened to you in Siberia, how much Memme still loves you, the love you had for Memme and Mom in the diary, the family you and Memme created after you got married, how hard Memme tried to get you back after the war, and I am confused and realize that I will never understand any of it and that it's not my place to understand and it is between you and Memme (like Mom said so wisely). I have no right to an opinion, and I love Memme and support Memme. And even though I'm just meeting you today, I have loved you for years. I am extremely imperfect, and I would never want anyone to judge all of the horrible things I have done in a circle of people like this. And life is long and painful, and people are awful to each other for many different reasons. And we came here with the idea of walking through the darkness to try to find each other in forgiveness. So, please forgive me for saying all of that when I had absolutely no right to.

But if I didn't say it, I would have been lying to you about who I am.

[Aino grabs Rebecca's hand and kisses it, then smiles at her. Harald takes Rebecca's hand in both of his and his eyes meet hers. He nods. Then he steps around to face Aino, Mall, and Rebecca and kneels down in front of them, putting his arms around their knees.]

**Harald:** I know that my actions and inaction have hurt all of you – directly and indirectly. I would understand if you never wanted to speak to me after this or hated me forever. Maybe some of the things I said have eased some of your pain. Perhaps other things I said have caused more pain. So, to all of you, I want to beg your forgiveness for any and all of the pain I have caused you for all of these years. I have made so many mistakes and have sometimes been a coward when I should have been strong. But I am so grateful to each of you for coming here, sitting with me, and allowing me to tell you my side of things to the best of my ability, as truthfully as I could and for being honest with me. You didn't have to. I know it was hard for you and you could have kept yourselves closed to me. I have lived within lies and fog and confusion for so long. Even when it's painful, the truth feels like freedom. I hope you will be able to find forgiveness in your hearts so maybe we can begin again.

[Harald sits back down in his chair, which is in between Aino and Mall. Everyone sits silently for a few minutes, staring into the dying embers of the firepit. Then, very naturally and almost simultaneously, Aino and Mall lean into Harald on each side. Harald puts his right arm around Mall and his left arm around Aino. They continue to stare into the fire, looking very peaceful. Rebecca turns off the recorder and goes to join them, snuggling in next to Mall. The group sits in silence until the embers die and the group is engulfed in darkness.]

## vi. conclusion

Knowing where or who you come from is a fundamental human need. Perhaps that need is greater or lesser depending on the type of person you are. Or maybe individuals with uninterrupted connections to people or place don't realize such a need exists because they don't have a gaping wound, broken roots where solid, strong limbs or trunks should be.

When I started filming her, my grandmother wondered who would want to hear her story. And I will admit I sometimes wondered how I would convince people these narratives from World War II, which I found to be incredibly rich and full of wisdom, would be interesting to anyone outside our family. But it didn't take long for me to realize that the act of telling of these stories is transformational: for the speaker, for the listener, for the speaker's descendants who may never have heard these stories or might learn valuable information about their families and themselves, and for the wider public that lacks this knowledge. Understanding complex situations takes time, time none of us seems willing to give. Oral history creates the space and time these conversations require to reveal nuance, which is critical to an accurate understanding of our world.

I'm thinking again of the Ukrainian mother and baby girl left this year at the border by the father who promises to join them as soon as he helps win this war (as the international community sends money but watches from the sidelines once again). Where will that baby's daughter be in 80 years? Will she be like me, sitting writing about the missing men in her family's life and in the lives of all of the women in her community? Will she have to dig around trying to find out what happened to her family? Will the international community have forgotten as soon as the war is over about the intergenerational effects of trauma and how to mitigate those effects?

Or will we have learned? Will we use tools such as oral history to capture the nuances of lived experiences, so history is not written by those in power who often control or manipulate the dominant narrative to suit their purposes? Will the international community learn from lessons of the past and start supporting rather than criminalizing refugees from every part of the world? We have a very long way to go before that happens, but these are conversations and work that I look forward to being part of in the future.

You may be wondering why a master's thesis is so personal. Well, for several reasons. First, my narrators have given and continue to give me the gift of sharing some of their more difficult stories in a space where we collaborate and where they work to make meaning out of their experiences. Being vulnerable is scary, which is why I've always been most comfortable in the seat of the listener, silent. But as I've learned from this project, it's important for me to share pieces of myself as well. So, this is my offering back to them, my narrators: a piece of my story that I have been able to start making meaning of because of the power of their stories.

Second, my experience illustrates the power oral history can have on a personal level as well as more widely. This project, these oral histories have altered the trajectory of my life and the lessons I've learned will stay with me and help me navigate my next steps and the ones after that ... What could oral history do for others exploring their family history – either history that has been lost to them or lineages that they think they already know?

## reflections on shared authority

My use of the fantasy oral history format to explore my family's unanswered questions is problematic in several ways. I criticized Harald's brother, Leo, for misrepresenting Harald's voice. But I, too, am controlling this narrative and what Harald says. What makes what I've done now any different than what Leo did then? And what about shared authority?

In this imaginary interview, I controlled all aspects of the interview, which is not realistic. In oral history, we value so highly the ethic of shared authority. In this case of my grandmother and grandfather who have passed away, I could be creative with their voices, but it was strange for my mother to read words and reactions attributed to her but written by someone else. So, we discussed which parts felt strange and why, which parts she would change or cut, what additional questions she would ask, and which questions she'd delete or modify.

**Fantasy Oral History – Things My Mother Would Change [3.30]:** Listen to the clip [here](#).

**Me:** What was the thing you had the strongest reaction to negative reaction, where I spoke for you.

**My mother, Mall:** You know, even that. I mean, that's not-- It's just strange to see an imagined conversation by you.

**Me:** Of course, but places maybe you would have responded differently?

**My mother:** I don't know that I would have responded differently. It's just strange to have-- And usually I respond with very few words anyway. But especially in an emotionally charged situation, I tend to--What was the other thing that we talked about where I, I kind of kept my cool? So, I'm not sure that I would disagree with any of it ... And there really wasn't anything that came out in the interviews that I would have taken a different position on, really. And I think it's because this was material that came out of letters and stories ...

**Me:** So. Okay, so there's nothing you would particularly change. Is there something you would particularly change or answer differently or ask differently that's there?

**My mother:** I don't think so.

**Me:** You're very agreeable.

**My mother:** You know, I don't look at things always critically. I'm pretty much in agreement with the way he answers your questions, based on what we've all learned. I think one of one of the things that I probably would not have said and one of the attitudes that you kind of ascribe to me was when we were talking, when I was asking him about why he hadn't met us in this in era in Leningrad, and you had me saying something like, "I came halfway around the world to see you, and you --" I wouldn't have said that. I don't think I challenge people in that way. I think I would have maybe expressed the disappointment -- and we were disappointed. You know, we sort of always

came back to the hotel hoping that maybe he was there. But I wouldn't have scolded him, even then about that. So that was something that I kind of felt wasn't true to my nature. And maybe I should have -- Well, Dad keeps telling me too that I don't express anger well, and I don't always even maybe recognize it as anger. I think more often it's sadness or disappointment or something like that.

My mother and I also spent a long time discussing the incident that occurred between Harald and my grandmother the night he came to her apartment after a party – the last secret she was holding on to. We talked a lot about our interpretations of the event, what language to use or not use and why. The conversation started within the structure of the fantasy oral history but then extended out to an hour-long conversation about the issue and how we think about going forward with this new piece of the story. Do we keep this sensitive part to ourselves? Or now that we know it, is it our responsibility to include it in the telling as part of our full story? We had slightly different opinions, but we did come to agreements about it. Overall, I thought this was probably the best example I've had – certainly the most difficult, sensitive example – of navigating shared authority with a collaborator.

In spite of any of the problematic aspects involved with creating this piece, I found this exercise extremely satisfying. Honestly, one reason for that was the fact that I did have full control. This led to some self-reflection about shared authority and my place within this project. Since I began working on this project with my grandmother, I've never quite felt comfortable owning it or even part of it. I became involved by helping my grandmother type her memoir.

Even though our work together expanded far beyond the typed memoir, for the entire time my grandmother was alive, even once I'd started documenting, filming, interviewing people other than my grandmother and studying oral history – in terms of her story and Harald and anything that had to do with them, I never felt like I could say this was my story. It was always hers. My grandmother didn't make me feel like that. She allowed me to ask whatever questions I wanted about Harald. She treated me like a partner in this exploration (she was sharing her authority with me). She appreciated the research I shared with her while we tried to understand what he'd experienced in Siberia. She trusted me to do what I felt was right with this story.

Similar to how I deferred to my grandmother, I also deferred to my mother when we went to Finland to meet Henrik, the son of the man who rescued my grandfather on the tiny island after he escaped from Estonia. Even though I had done the research and gotten us to the island, I deferred to my mother because the exploration was about *her father*, and I felt she was the one who needed closure. I held back and let her talk among the group, but then felt frustrated because I had so much to say. In the end, I did say what I needed to, but went through an internal struggle: Do I stay quiet and defer to my elder, or do I speak up and own this project?

So, within the confines of this fantasy oral history, I realized I liked having full control in this one space. But almost immediately, I realized that to make the piece stronger, more accurate, I needed to collaborate with my mother. Going through that process helped me identify the dynamic of this process and my place within it. This reflection on the power dynamic between me, my grandmother, and my mother in this imaginary space helped me clearly define my difficulty navigating the dynamic I'd been having in the real world. That ongoing negotiation, that ongoing



work of sorting through who has the power and why and should they and what do I need to give up for the good of the project is the challenge of maintaining shared authority. It's also what brings trust and beauty and depth to the relationship with our narrators, ourselves, and our projects.

## reflections on embodiment and healing

The process of writing the fantasy oral history with my grandfather, Harald, was extraordinarily healing for me. For almost 10 years, I have been living with this ghost of my grandfather, getting to know him through his diary and letters, participating in conversations with my grandmother, reading documents from the National Archives, hearing stories from relatives, researching the era, prisons, and Siberia, and, most recently, exploring the physical spaces he inhabited. As my knowledge of him has increased and my image of him has come into focus, however, the unanswered questions continued to leave gaping holes. Even with all the information we added, certain things we would never know, could never know. This was always very painful for my grandmother, this inability for her to get closure.

However, after seven years of conversations with my grandmother and three more years of research and study that I continued after she passed away, I realized that in addition to whatever may have been passed down to me, I'd also embodied all the information about Harald I'd been gathering over the years. So, when I sat down with the intention of writing something in Harald's voice – a poem, a song – what spilled out instead were his answers to all of the questions my grandmother and I discussed repeatedly without satisfactory resolution.

The many parts of my psyche that were working continuously on these problems with and for my grandmother all these years were engaged, pulling answers from books, letters Harald wrote, conversations friends, movies about Soviet times and the KGB, the Memorial Wall I visited this summer, the Institute for Historical Memory conference I attended in July, comments my grandmother made in her interviews. All the sources came forward to answer our questions. Instead of seeing each issue from mine or my grandmother's perspective – where the questions came from – I was able to clearly see for the first time reasonable possibilities from Harald's perspective for why things might have happened the way they did. Most of the interview is written based either on actual facts of my family's story or things I learned in my research as possibilities. Not much of what I wrote is completely fabricated. Most of it could have been possible.

Within my family, Harald didn't have a voice. Any letters he wrote were read by censors, so he wrote cryptically. Any letters he sent were routed through his family in Estonia or Canada, so he had to rely on them to forward them on to their rightful owner. The box of letters we found in 2014 in Harald's brother's belongings, where Leo pretended to Harald that he *had* forwarded those letters, and then he pretended to Harald to respond on behalf of my grandmother, Leo was twisting and contorting Harald's voice. That almost seems worse than having no voice at all. I don't think Harald ever knew about this betrayal.

During most of the time I worked with my grandmother, I tried to defend Harald, tried to stick up for him because it seemed like no one else did. When I wrote this fantasy interview, many of the answers come from this perspective, giving him the benefit of the doubt, assuming that if he

*could* have gotten back to Estonia, he would have. If everyone else who spoke for him assumed he had bad intentions without having all the facts, I chose the position of assuming good intentions without having facts.

What surprised me most was that once I finished writing the interview, I felt physical and emotional relief, almost as if I'd had an actual conversation in which Harald answered our questions. I felt settled, I felt closure. It sounds silly, since I wrote the answers myself. Even though I was aware intellectually that I created those answers, my body didn't seem to know the difference.

After my mother read it, she felt similarly. Aside from the few comments she had about feeling uncomfortable reading her own reactions and reading certain pieces of dialogue she couldn't imagine herself saying, she found the rest of the answers very satisfying and realistic. She admitted that they might feel satisfying because they are like a fantasy. But she, too, felt reading it gave her a sense of closure, some sense that she might now have some explanation for the missing pieces of her father, her relationship with him, why he never showed up when she tried to meet up with him in Leningrad in the 1970s. We explored why one particular section of the dialog felt strange to her, and it ended up revealing something profound.

**Nicknames [3:32]:** Listen to the clip [here](#).

**My mother, Mall:** It was almost strange to read his addressing me with my name and then with the nicknames, you know? I think that brought a little bit of discomfort, too. I just haven't heard it. I'm not used to hearing it. Well, this is this is what Art [her therapist] would have said, "This is this is why little girls need fathers, because--" Yeah.

**Me:** Would've been nice to hear though, right? I would have loved to have heard that for you.

**My mother:** So.

**Me:** I mean, would that have been nice to have heard? Or would it have been --

**My mother:** Oh, I'm sure it would have. It just felt weird to read it and to imagine it happening. So, but none of it, yeah no, I thought about that afterwards, yesterday, and I was trying to find a couple of places in the dialogs where it comes up. No, no, that's all fine. And honestly, I don't think this--

**Me:** But do you feel like, ooh, that feels weird and uncomfortable? Or you're like, Oh, gosh, I wish that it had happened. Or was it just like, Oh, that just feels weird?

**My mother:** No, I think primarily my thought was it really felt, it felt strange and different. And strange and different make it kind of uncomfortable.

**Me:** Yeah, no, because for me, I thought, Oh, gosh, I wish that had happened for you. That's so fascinating. For you, it didn't feel good. It felt like weird.

**My mother:** It just felt strange. Yeah. Not that it was bad, you know, but it just it's not something I'm used to ...

**Me:** Was that uncomfortable because-- did anyone use terms of endearment for you? Was anybody sweet and, like, cuddly with you when you were little?

**My mother:** Well, I think Memm was at times, and Nanni was.

**Me:** OK, did she have nicknames for you? Like little sweet nicknames for you.

**My mother:** Well, yeah. Nuku.

**Me:** Because [Harald] did call you that.

**My mother:** Yeah.

**Me:** Those were his nicknames for you in the letters, and in the diary he called you that. When she talks about him having his "Daddy's Hour," that was what he called you, in person. But you don't remember that, obviously, but--

**My mother:** Yeah.

**Me:** Okay, so people did have nicknames and, like, were sweet with you.

**My mother:** Yeah, but not. I mean, not the women, really, very much.

**Me:** That's what I'm saying. Was anybody like that with you?

**My mother:** Not in the same way that a father would have been probably.

**Me:** Nobody was doting on you, Memme talks about her dad who doted on her.

**My mother:** Yeah.

**Me:** Brought her extra pairs of boots and extra pairs of shirts that she loved and--

**My mother:** Well, they had money to do that, and--

**Me:** No, I'm not saying just the buying of things. I'm saying--

**My mother:** No, I know.

**Me:** Just the attention to what she loved.

**My mother:** Yeah.

**Me:** Interesting. It didn't feel weird because it was a weird thing. It felt weird because you never felt that. Oh. That makes me sad.

This was a powerful moment for me to re-visit in the recording. And it connected me immediately to my relationship to my father and the nicknames he had for me when I was young, our close relationship, and then trying to imagine a childhood without that. I'd never been able to imagine my mother's childhood without her father on such a tangible level. That a fictional work could trigger such a strong emotional response in my mother, then lead to a conversation between us about something true and deeply buried, tells me that there is value in this notion of filling in gaps – the silences where oral histories may not be able to reach – with creative alternatives. This is something I hope to explore further.

What is the overall value of this fantasy oral history? It isn't factual, it doesn't adhere to oral history standards of shared authority. (Although I did review the interview with my mother, and she did make edits, so I would say I *aspired* to shared authority.) This piece is also not totally fiction, so it's not a novel. Who is the audience? Who benefits from this piece? This genre? How does this relate to oral history? Can this be considered legitimate oral history?

My questions in the beginning of this thesis were about the missing, the disappeared, and what we as oral historians could do to capture their voices. Do we have an obligation to them? Yes, I believe we do. Does the genre of fantasy oral history speak to those missing voices?

I approached this experiment with the hope of unsilencing my grandfather. But if I'm honest, it's *my* voice I hear. I created the answers I needed to hear. The absence of Harald's voice in the family, the deficit it created, was so impactful that it forced me to create a voice. That I was compelled to do that speaks to the value of these voices within our families and, if we continue that logic, the value of oral history.

## reflections on the body

This exploration alongside my grandmother into her history, and my parents into their history, my family's history, has yielded many gifts, many of which continue to reveal themselves. During my first year at OHMA, I was deeply moved by alumna Ellen Coon's April 2019 workshop, "The Mountain with Two Wives: Landscape and Embodied Memory in Kathmandu." In her presentation, Ellen so beautifully explained that within the context of the Newar culture, all of the gods, including the angry ones, were adored. She explained that, "Female anger or wrath is a holy force in the tantric religious culture. It arises in response to the earth being out of balance and life, or living beings, being disrespected." Once she told me that, I was able to view my meltdowns and my daughter's tantrums differently. Prior to that, if my daughter had a tantrum, I would have handled it poorly, would likely have escalated it, then once she finally calmed down (without much help from me), I would have said something like, "Oh good, I'm glad *you're* back," as if that other, louder, angrier, darker side were not really her at all.

After Ellen's comment, I was able to see my daughter, and myself, differently. All of this is part of her, just as my darker, angrier, louder, inappropriate self is one of the many parts of me. We are complex and layered, comprised of love, compassion, rage, sadness, nervousness, excitement, and feelings sometimes we cannot contain. Unfortunately, we don't live in a place where the darker, louder, scarier sides of women are embraced, revered, cultivated, and welcomed. However, I can be conscious, for my daughter and for myself, to find ways to release those emotions and energies in ways that are good for us and will allow us to look at those moments,

those feelings, as teachers from whom we can learn. I can stop fighting these appearances of my darker self. I can learn, and teach my daughter, to be still and wait for her; and when she does come, which she inevitably will, to welcome her.

I no longer resent my father for his outbursts when I was young. I've had those outbursts. I know what my body feels like before one comes on. I've tried to help my daughter through them. I recognize they come on when we feel overwhelmed, trapped, or lacking control.

I think about my father as a four-year-old, white-haired little boy on his father's shoulders out in the water in the middle of the night, feeling the cold water rising up his legs as his family wades out into the darkness, farther and farther from home. He waits with them for a fishing boat to rescue him and his family, only to thrust them out into the unknown. And I feel compassion. For him, for myself, for my daughter, for all of them.

### final reflection on silence

I just can't help but wonder what my life, my family member's lives would have been like without the silence. What if all the facts of our story were unchanged (my grandfather Harald, my great-uncle Endel, and my great-grandfather Karl would still have been lost) but the men had been kept alive in our words and memories and stories and life lessons – the good and the bad, with honesty and openness – and if the incredible strength each woman drew from herself to survive alone had instead been used to share her grief and then her burdens with the others?

My grandmother did not start speaking her truth until she was 96 years old. Once she got started, she didn't stop until she said everything that needed to be said. By witnessing my grandmother's unsilencing, I have been driven to research, journey, and dream to unsilence my grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-uncle. I have been working to assemble the scattered and shattered pieces of their identities to sculpt whole, human representations of the men they were or might have been one day.

Regarding silence, I have always been a private person. I am a writer and editor by profession, but I've never shared any personal or creative writing outside my close circle of family or friends. I tend to freeze up if I have to speak up in group settings (classes, work meetings, parent meetings at my daughter's school). I have strong opinions but struggle to communicate them well if my comments aren't prepared in advance or well-rehearsed. But seven years working with my grandmother changed that.

My grandmother's brother, a student activist, was forcibly disappeared, silenced, because of his political views. Her father was forcibly disappeared because he supported his son. Silenced. Friends and relatives shunned my grandmother after her brother and father were taken, because they were afraid to be seen with her – maybe they would be next if they were associated with her family. She was left alone with no one to talk to, no one to confide in, no one to trust. Silenced. A few years later, her first husband, Harald, was also captured – he was silenced by the prison, by censors, by layers of family members interpreting his experiences with their own opinions and judgements. When my grandmother emigrated to the United States, she didn't talk about her experiences to anyone, not even her own mother (or daughter). She silenced herself.

My grandmother and her family were silenced by outside forces, and they silenced themselves to survive. By contrast, I don't need to be silent to survive, but it sometimes feels that way in my body. Living so vividly within this history, *my* history, through these conversations with my grandmother and my parents, I realized I'd inherited this tendency toward silence in my body, but it wasn't actually mine. This realization profoundly impacted my desire to speak my truth, no matter how imperfectly I do so and regardless of how it is received by others.

The people who came before me were silent out of necessity. I owe it to my family, and myself, to use my voice whenever called upon and whatever form that might take, and to continue my oral history work of providing space for voices that might otherwise be silenced, because too many of my relatives lost their lives exercising theirs or were silenced before they could.

### where do I go from here?

My OHMA chapter ends here, but my journey continues. I have so much more to investigate, explore, uncover, and learn about my family, myself, this practice, and my contributions to it. My hopes for this project are to tell the story of what happened to Estonia and other small countries like it through the story of my family's experience. I think it's important for individuals in the United States to understand the nuances of history, because by understand and truthfully facing history we are better equipped to recognize the complex situations facing us today.

I would also like to continue interviewing multiple generations of Estonian-Americans, as I'm very interested in the transgenerational impact of the communal trauma of World War II, the deportations, the disappearances. While I was in Estonia this summer, I connected with people in the oral history and historical memory fields around Europe – as I mentioned earlier, the past is very present there in terms of research – and I would be interested in continuing my research in Estonia as well. While my experience and all of my interviews have occurred in the diaspora community, I would be interested in exploring the question of how those who fled were perceived by those who stayed? In the case of both sides of my family, if they'd stayed, they likely would have been sent to prison or killed. But they also thought they'd be back soon, as soon as the Americans and British won the war. That didn't happen, and those who stayed were stuck behind the Iron Curtain for 50 years.

I have one more story that illustrates why my journey must continue and why even 80 years later is not too late to find new information. I mentioned earlier that until the day my grandmother died, she believed the rumors she'd heard about her brother, Endel, because she never received any official news about his fate to contradict this story: that the authorities had arrived at his workplace on June 1, 1941, and to evade capture he jumped out a third-floor window. We thought he survived the fall but was taken away and likely executed almost immediately. We also understood that my great-grandfather had been arrested on the same day as a result of his son's activities. Endel had a suitcase of anti-communist posters, leaflets, etc. that he'd hid in the apartment; his father found it and knew how dangerous it was, so he took the suitcase out of the city and hid it at a family friend's house in the countryside. Both Endel's activities and his father's were made known to the authorities.

Flash forward to 2014, when I visited Estonia to research the fates of our missing men. There was definitive information about my grandfather Harald, and my great-grandfather, Karl – when they

were arrested, where they ended up, when and where they died. But about Endel, the Black Book of Political Arrests listed his fate as “unknown.” When I asked my friend Kaia how that was possible after so many decades, she said “someone knows.”

So, this summer, when I visited Kaia again, in the brand-new building of the National Archives, where much of the documentation of the various archives in Estonia had been consolidated since my last visit, I didn’t expect to find any more information about Endel. I went hoping to find more information about Harald, but I also sent her Endel’s full name and date of birth on the off chance she was able to dig something up on him as well.

Before I arrived at the Archives, I had already done quite a bit of research on my own at the [Victims of Communism Memorial](#), Memorial Wall, where I found the names of Endel and Karl. I spoke to the manager of oral history at the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory to clarify what the notations and dates in Endel and Karl’s database entries meant, and this is the new information I learned:

- Endel was arrested at his apartment (*not* at his workplace, as we’d always believed) on June 1, 1941. (We found out later from Kaia, that he was arrested at the same time as several other young men.)
- My grandfather was arrested on June 3, 1941 (*not* on June 1, as we’d always believed).
- On June 3, Endel was in an interrogation room on the third floor of the NKVD (later KGB) building. At some point during the interrogation, he jumped out the window to



KARL PÄRN 1882–1941

ENDEL PÄRN 1917–1940

Memorial Wall:

I found the names of my great-grandfather and great-uncle on the inside of the wall. My grandfather, Harald, is in the electronic database but is not listed on the wall, because technically he *did* escape from Estonia (though he was captured in Finland and then spent the rest of his life in Siberia).

My great-grandfather, Karl Pärn (1882-1941)  
My great-uncle, Endel Pärn (1917-1940)

*\* This is an error; his dates are 1918-1941*

attempt suicide. (Apparently it was not uncommon to try this – if you were unsuccessful at the suicide attempt, at least you were taken to the hospital instead of the prison.)

- Because of the timing of the two arrests and the additional new detail that the suicide attempt happened while Endel was in the interrogation room, I wonder if Endel was told during that interrogation that his father had just been arrested because of his (Endel's) crimes against the state, and that that is why he tried to commit suicide. In any case, he survived the fall, but was badly injured and was sent to the hospital.

When I visited Kaia in the archives, she found some additional information for me. For context, it's important to understand that one week after my great-uncle and great-grandfather were arrested by the Soviets, the German Army invaded Estonia. As a result, the Soviets fled to Russia, and the German occupation of Estonia began.

**Kaia Ivask explains what she found out about my great-uncle Endel (Estonian National Archives, August 5, 2022):** Listen to the clip [here](#).

**Me:** So, then he [Endel] was put in the hospital. The Germans came in. And because he was at the hospital, he was not killed. They took him with them to Russia.

**Kaia:** Yeah. The hospitals were evacuated, so the patients as well.

**Me:** Okay. So, they evacuated the hospital, or hospitalized prisoners, to Russia with them.

**Kaia:** Not all hospitals, I think, were evacuated.

**Me:** And then they took them. So, they took him to Russia.

**Kaia:** Yeah.

**Me:** And then we don't know what happened to him?

**Kaia:** And then we don't know what happened until there is some documents from '42. It says that -- it says nothing about him. They are searching [for] this trial file, but they don't find it. And here are the documents, which say that there was not a trial because he was in bad condition. So. And it's '42. And yeah. And then in '47, they are preparing the new trial.

**Me:** For who?

**Kaia:** I don't know. Not the new one, but to continue the trial.

**Me:** For who?

**Kaia:** I don't know where he was, because it says nothing about if he was in prison or he managed to escape or what kind of condition he was anyway.

**Me:** But his name is still on the documents, it's still about him?



**Kaia:** Yeah. Pärn, Endel. Yeah.

**Me:** Jeez, oh my God.

**Kaia:** And the file ends with that there was no trial. And so, we canceled the trial.

**Me:** And that's 19--

**Kaia:** 19-- it says, sorry, it's '64 already and it's precratit, it means "cancelled".

**Me:** 1964?

**Kaia:** '64. Yes.

**Me:** He was alive in 1964?

**Kaia:** I don't know.

**Me:** What the hell?

**Kaia:** It says nothing about him.

**Me:** That says '64 too.

**Kaia:** Here it said that he-- the personal. Yeah, the personal data about him were born in 1912 -- but this is wrong, because some documents are saying that it was 1918 -- it's the right Endel. Lived in Tallinn. Was born in Tallinn. Estonian. Citizen of the USSR, of course. Not a member of [the Communist] Party. He lived in Tallinn until he was arrested on Lembitu Street. And he studied in Tallinn Technical University. TalTech. It said that the living place, current living place, is not known. So, he was released. But --

**Me:** Still in Russia.

**Kaia:** Still may be.

**Me:** But doesn't say where in Russia?

**Kaia:** I can investigate this finding more, because I didn't read it line to line. So, but this is the one '48--

**Me:** That's what you texted me. And I thought it must have been auto correct. Because as we've understood it, he always either died right away or was killed probably right away. But no.

**Kaia:** No, no ...

**Me:** So, this is the file that was probably in Tallinn, or you said this is the file, these parts of the file were in the Soviet files.

**Kaia:** Yeah.

**Me:** So, any information about Endel during Soviet times, even if he were in, somewhere in Russia, the information would be here because he was born in Estonia.

**Kaia:** Yeah. He was born in Estonia.

**Me:** So, whatever happened to him after he left here would still be tracked here by the Soviets.

**Kaia:** Yeah. It could be, but. But if he, how can I say that, if he didn't do anything to document-- then there's no document. I think he was released [for] some kind of reason. Maybe he was too ill, and I think he just disappeared somewhere, who knows where and maybe with wrong name or something, and he--

**Me:** And then they just lost track of him.

**Kaia:** Maybe, I don't know how good we have contact with the Russian Estonians? Now it's complicated, but maybe it's possible to get to know something about him. Maybe he has children or something, but-- Yeah, now I think the Estonians in Russia, they just don't, not that they don't want, but they are afraid.

**Me:** Now it's tricky, yeah. That's unbelievable. I mean, I'm sure by now he has died. But we really always thought he either died immediately or, like, a couple of days later or, you know, we assumed or heard that he was basically executed either then or a couple of days later. Basically, it sounds like he lived 20 years at least.

**Kaia:** No. Why they why they make this document if he was dead?

**Me:** Right.

**Kaia:** I think Russians knew very well if he was dead. But as they don't know where he lives, so--.

**Me:** Somebody was kind of trying to keep a tab on him, right?

**Kaia:** [I'm 95%] sure that he was alive at '64.

## vii. epilogue

**My mother and my grandmother singing *Silent Night* in Estonian one month before my grandmother died (December 8, 2020) [0:58]:** Listen to the clip [here](#).

### Püha Öö

Püha öö, õnnistud öö  
kõik on maas, rahu sees  
Joosep valvab ja Marial seal  
hingab lapsuke põlvede peal  
Maga, patuste rõõm!  
Maga, patuste rõõm!

### Holy Night

Holy night, blessed night!  
Everything is peaceful on the ground.  
Joosep is watching and Maria  
is breathing, the baby is on her knees.  
Sleep, joy of sinners!  
Sleep, joy of sinners!

January 2020

Slowly, quietly I open the door of her room in the assisted living wing without knocking. It's January 2020, and I've been coming to visit as often as possible lately.

My grandmother's room is dark except for a single, overhead light directly inside the front door as I enter. My eyes quickly adjust, scanning past the entryway to land on her bed in the far corner of the room. She is lying motionless on top of the covers, still dressed from the day with her legs and gold lamé slippers crossed, her hands clasped and resting on her stomach. I assume she is napping. A retired doctor, she is practical and health conscious and has always fully embraced her need for sleep, a need that is increasing daily.

I left work earlier than I should have and navigated rush-hour traffic to get here, so I take a moment inside the door to slow the pace of my breath and my thoughts. I gently place my bags down, drape my coat over the back of the chair, walk to the far side of the room and sit down beside her on the bed. The twin-size mattress swallows her slight frame, which looks frailer than it did just a few days ago.

I decide to leave the Tiffany-style lamp on her nightstand turned off. I don't want to startle her. I am just about to lean over and whisper to her that I've arrived to spend time with her, when I realize that she isn't sleeping. She's crying quietly. I gently lift her tiny, bony, cold hands and fold them into my large, soft warm ones and say a simple prayer aloud, hoping this will comfort her and allow us to move into our familiar ritual of tea and conversation. With her eyes still closed, she joins me, speaking as clearly and coherently as if she were 20, 50, 70 years younger. She speaks to her God like a dear and loving parent walking beside her, whom she trusts to guide her through her troubles and confusion just as He did during her escape from her homeland during the war.

"What's your name?" she asks me once I finish the blessing. I pause for a second but am not really surprised by her question, because she has become increasingly disoriented during my visits.

"Rebecca," I respond.

"Oh!" she exclaims. "I have a granddaughter named Rebecca," she says, her voice filled with love.

“Yes, Memme, it’s me,” I laugh, relieved, because that means her poor eyesight combined with the very dim lighting in the room and her emotional state when I entered the room – not dementia – caused her confusion. I feel myself relax, not realizing her behavior had had me on edge.

“You found me!” she cries. Then she bursts into tears.

I am shocked. I don’t understand what is happening. She is inconsolable, sobbing, trying to explain to me what has been happening to her over the past – long while. “I didn’t know where I was,” she says. “I was waiting for them – I couldn’t find them. I was hiding. They couldn’t find me.” I stroke her hand, trying to calm her.

She tells me she didn’t know where she was, and that she was waiting for her father and brother to come. She says they haven’t found her yet, so she is so glad that I have come. She grabs my hands. She was clearly very frightened, but now that I have come, she is starting to feel safer.

My heart breaks for her. At the exact moment that I was stepping into her room that evening, worrying about work and traffic and daily nuisances, she was caught between the Now and Memory. She was alone – alone in her room, alone on her bed, and alone in the war – lost, panicking, looking for her family and unable to find them. In life, she never found them. But her body and parts of her mind continue to look for them. All I can do for her is hold her hand as tears stream down my cheeks.

My grandmother died two weeks after that visit. I pray she finally found her father and her brother.

## viii. acknowledgements

First and foremost, I have to thank my grandmother, Dr. Aino Tuul Kaevats, “Memme,” for asking me to help her type her memoir. That’s where this all began. This started as her project, but she was gracious as I recorded her, filmed her (badly, amateurishly at first), and hounded her with questions. Our partnership grew into a years-long collaboration of discovery. I feel so honored that she allowed me on this journey with her. I am humbled by her courage, honesty, faith in God, and trust in me. I miss her, I miss our conversations, I miss her advice and wisdom, but am thankful that I had her for as long as I did and got to know her as a full human being in all of her complexity.

Mom and Dad, thank you for your constant and unwavering support and encouragement and no-questions-asked participation in every stage of the process. Thank you for being willing to open your memories to me, share your reflections with me, and journey to places that I know have sometimes been very difficult.

Sofia and Fernando, you have been a part of this entire project from the beginning. Memme trusted both of you completely – to film her, handle her precious family photographs, or create art that represented her emotions. All the time I spent with Memme and on the creation of the book, the exhibit at Columbia (docent Sofia), and every other necessary part of this project – none of it would have been possible without either of you. Thank you.

Laura Blake Peterson, we met by the lake all those years ago so you could help me figure out what to do with this story. Thank you for your wisdom, experience, advice, and friendship. I’m excited for wherever this journey takes us next.

Rebecca Diaz, my Finno-Ugric sister and research partner, you (and the girls) have been an honorary member of this team (and docents) from the start and will be critical until the very end.

Deb Koch, if you hadn’t *demand*ed that I start recording my grandmother immediately when I told you how excited I was about the things I was learning about my family, and if you hadn’t convinced me that it didn’t matter how poorly I did it or how cheap the videocam was (since I had no confidence in my technology skills), this project would probably have ended as something I typed up for my grandmother way back when so she could pass it to her grandkids for posterity. Thank you, my friend.

Our Estonian relatives and friends (Toomas, Anneliis, and Andres), and our new Finnish friends who feel like family (Henrik, Eva, Kasper, Kaj, Seija, and Gunnar). Your hospitality restored my faith in humanity. You brought my grandfather, a man I never met, to life for me and Mom.

Thank you to my OHMA family – faculty and colleagues – who have inspired me and pushed me beyond what I thought were my limits, over and over again. This piece has truly been “a lifetime in the making,” but it would not have gotten over the finish line (or even near it) without these

four years at Columbia. I have been blessed to meet and learn from four cohorts during my tenure and have taken something from each one but want to make note of a few individuals in particular.

Christina Barba, we met on my first day and you have been my touchstone ever since, pushing me, inspiring me with your work, and supporting me just by understanding the way I grew up, because you grew up the same.

The entire 2018–19 cohort, we all accepted each other just as we were, learned from each other, grew with each other, and I will never forget the way you welcomed so respectfully my 101-year-old grandmother into our classroom the day of the public interview with such generosity and kindness. You made an elderly woman feel relevant. It moves me still to think about it.

Vanessa Kendall Harper, we've had such a short time together (relative to my very long time at OHMA!), but the connection was almost instant. Thank you for your generosity – of time, knowledge, information, tools – when I was preparing for my summer in Estonia. And for the wisdom you've shared during our many thesis (and life) conversations.

Nyssa Chow, you've been an inspiration to me and my work since I took a weekend workshop with you many years ago. It was worth the four-year wait to finally get into your classroom. You are a gifted artist, teacher, and mentor. I hope to live into these two words you gifted me – *poet*, *filmmaker* – which I'd never heard or thought before about myself.

Liza Zapol and Nicki Pombier, thank you for guiding me to my own path to freedom.

Zoë West and Lara Nettelfield, your human rights classes and the books you assigned were game changers for me and have altered the course of my work.

Saving the best for last: Amy Starecheski. Ever since my first conversation with you, you have understood me and been able to synthesize exactly what I need or am intending with such precision, often before even I am able to see it. You are generous with your time, skills, and resources. I feel so lucky to have been able to work with and learn from you these past few years. You are truly one of the people I admire most because of the intention and integrity with which you approach everything. Thank you!

## ix. notes

1. (p. v) Krista Tippett, “Rachel Yehuda: How Trauma and Resilience Cross Generations,” On Being Podcast, July 30, 2015, <https://onbeing.org/programs/rachel-yehuda-how-trauma-and-resilience-cross-generations-nov2017/- audio>.
2. (p. 3) Jill Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness*, p. 1–2.
3. (p. 4) Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees,” p. 265.
4. (p. 4) Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness*, p. 58.
5. (p. 4) Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, p. 52.
6. (p. 4) Donna Dismukes, “The Forced Repatriation of Soviet Citizens: A Study in Military Obedience,” p. 66–67
7. (p. 4) Dismukes, “Forced Repatriation,” p. 4.
8. (p. 5) Dismukes, “Forced Repatriation,” 46.
9. (p. 6) Elise Chenier, “Oral History’s Afterlife,” p. 308.
10. (p. 20) Judith Alpert, “Enduring Mothers, Enduring Knowledge: On Rape and History,” p. 296.
11. (p. 29) Galit Atlas, *Emotional Inheritance: A Therapist, Her Patients, and the Legacy of Trauma*.
12. (p. 29) Atlas, *Emotional Inheritance*, p. 17.
13. (p. 30) Alpert, p. 301
14. (p. 30) Winona Wheeler, “Reflections on the Social Relations of Indigenous Oral History,” p. 196.
15. (p. 42) I found out this summer that my grandfather was imprisoned in Leningrad for an entire year – after his three months in the Finnish internment camp but before he was sent to Siberia. I read an article written by a man who shared a cell with my grandfather in the Leningrad prison. The article describes the prisoners being interrogated with methods including electrocution. This summer is the first time my mother or I had heard any of this.
16. (p. 53) In real life, there was a gap between the last entry in Harald’s diary on March 21, 1945, and the dates of his arrest in the internment camp in Finland on March 29, 1945. According to my friend, Kaia Ivask, at the National Archives in Estonia, my grandfather’s file indicates that he was arrested with 15 other men on March 29 and handed over to the Red

- Army. What happened between March 21 and March 29? In the last entry of his diary, he alludes to perhaps trying to escape. Maybe he and these other men tried to? Or maybe when he wrote his entry on March 21, he just suspected a group of them would be turned over to the Russians shortly? I have absolutely no idea what happened during those eight days or why they were turned over, how they ended up in that prison in Leningrad. I wish they had tried and been able to escape, especially since the security at the internment camp seemed very lax.
17. (p. 54) This is an actual article, written by one of the men in the boat. He shared a cell with my grandfather in the Leningrad prison and describes this interaction, asking my grandfather for advice about how to commit suicide with a razor blade.
  18. (p. 54) In the same article, the author writes that he commanded the boat. In my grandfather's diary, he clearly states that this same man was sick in the bottom of the boat for most of the journey out of Estonia, while the two men were forced to take turns holding their hands in the frigid. Note that my grandfather's diary was written contemporaneously, while the article was written decades later. This article brings up another aspect of Harald's silencing, or rather this man hijacking his narrative. In this published article, this man is claiming himself as the hero of that journey.
  19. (p. 55) I had the unexpected and incredible privilege of attending a conference of the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory, where I gathered invaluable information about the Soviet times, the disappearances, the deportations, dissidents, the KGB and its relentless cruelty and its lingering shadow. There was nothing too base, too low for the KGB agents to do to gain leverage over one of their victims. During our tour of Pateri Prison, the head of the conference told us that it was very common for the Soviets to forge letters from wives or loved ones that said they were divorcing their husband or leaving him for someone else or declaring that they were the one who turned their husband into the authorities because he was useless or they wanted to be with another man him in because he was useless – whatever they thought would break the person to their will.
  20. (p. 57) My grandfather did work for a clinic. As I understand the story, his wife Nadja was also a doctor, and her father was the director of the clinic where my grandfather worked.
  21. (p. 60) In 1959, the Nixon Administration indicated it was working with the Soviets to free some of the prisoners in Siberia. My grandmother contacted a lawyer to see if she could bring Harald to the United States. By this time, 15 years had passed since they'd been separated, but she still held out hope that they could reunite. She didn't hear from Harald directly, but she heard from Leo that their parents had received some kind of threatening communication from the Soviets – either threatening toward them or toward Harald, like they were going to put him back in prison. Based on the family's reaction, my grandmother halted all proceedings. And she determined that she would have to let go of the idea of ever seeing Harald again and cut off all correspondence with him. So, she did.
  22. (p. 61) Harald's parents did receive a letter from the authorities about my grandmother's petition to get Harald released from Siberia and sent to the United States. The letter freaked out the entire family. As a result, my grandmother cancelled her petition.
  23. (p. 61) Harald did write a letter. I just don't know what his intention for that letter was.



24. (p. 62) This is all true. The only part we don't know is whether he was upset about it, too. Did he want to come to the United States? Was he threatened with more prison time? Had he already started his second family by then and didn't know how to tell my grandmother?
25. (p. 63) This part of the story is 100% true. My mother, father, and sister traveled to Leningrad (now, St. Petersburg) in 1975 to try to meet up with Harald. They sent word through the family that they would be staying in a particular hotel. It happened just as it states here: every day they took my sister out sightseeing. Every afternoon they returned to the hotel hoping for a sign of Harald. He never showed. He never wrote directly to my mother to explain why (that we know of). I suppose it's possible he wrote a letter or sent communication through his brother, Leo, and Leo kept that message from my mom, but we will never know if that is the case. I think someone might have told someone else through yet another person that one of Harald's parents had died the year before so he'd traveled to Estonia for that and couldn't get away again for another big trip. (I believe I was told it took two weeks to get from Siberia to Estonia by train.) Because we had no concrete information, I imagined this response. However, it was always my belief that Harald was unable to leave Siberia even after he was released from prison. I think he was too valuable to them, being that he was a talented and much needed physician. Based on my research, it was not hard for me to imagine that they'd do anything to prevent him from connecting to family outside of the Soviet Union, especially in the United States.
26. (p. 64) We have no idea why Harald didn't show up. At the time my mother went to Leningrad to try to meet Harald, she didn't know yet that he had another family. My sister, who was traveling with my parents, was around seven years old, and Harald's son would have been about a year younger than my sister. For the past few years, I've been talking to my mother about whether we could find a way to meet Juri. My mother had never spoken to Juri. No one in my family had. As much as I've talked about Harald, I felt like it was time to make an effort to try meet his son, my uncle. I also hoped I could learn more about Harald in the more recent past, what he'd been like when Juri was growing up.

While my parents and I were in Estonia together this past July, my mother's cousin Toomas, who is in contact with Juri, arranged for us to make a video call to meet Juri and his wife and daughter. We originally planned to travel to Siberia to meet him in person. Unfortunately, because of the war in Ukraine, traveling to Siberia wasn't possible this summer. But my mother did want to meet him, so the video call was our only option.

Juri speaks only Russian, so Toomas translated for us. It was awkward meeting my half-uncle, the son of my estranged grandfather over video chat, but the conversation was pleasant and friendly. Because of the language barrier and because of the family situation – and because Juri lives in Siberia and Putin is cracking down on any speech against the Russian government – we were careful to stick to the niceties, introducing ourselves, our families, etc.

My mother, daughter, and I were on our end of the video call. Juri, his wife, and daughter were on his end. Juri is a few years older than I am. To see him in person was jarring, shocking, incredible, powerful. He looked so much like my brother that it almost took my breath away.



My mother's half-brother Juri and his family in Siberia when we met them for the first time on the video call. Even over video chat, I think the resemblance between my half-uncle and my brother is striking.



My brother Allan and his wife Lindsey. My brother was always told that he took after our grandfather, Harald. This photo confirms that.

27. (p. 64) The examples of the KGB tactics in particular reminded me of one letter Harald wrote to his brother, Leo, where he says that he “is not as heartless” as my grandmother and mother think and “neither great words nor anything else could make you understand him.” I have always wondered what he meant by that and what additional information he could have included had the censors not been reading his correspondence. I spoke with people who work at the Institute, all of whom have personal experiences, family members they lost during those times.

One woman spoke about how for so many years she tried to contact her grandfather who had been released from Siberia. But instead of returning home to Estonia, where he feared always being seen or treated as an enemy of the state, he chose to go to Latvia, where he eventually remarried a Latvian woman. After many years, this woman went to visit her grandfather in Latvia. Like me, she felt something was missing in her life. As soon as she saw him and his wife, she realized she'd made a mistake by going there. He was so terrified when she walked into their house. He didn't know if she (his own granddaughter) was there to spy on him, turn him in, find a way to send him back to Siberia. This woman realized that she had been so concerned about her own need to meet and know her grandfather – for her own sake – that she hadn't been able to fathom this type of reaction, the level of fear that he still lived with after his experience.

I will never know what my grandfather endured during his time in prison. I am 100% that I wouldn't be able to handle it if I did. So, it's these glimpses that keep me thinking that there was so much more to the story that he was unable to tell. This could be fantasy of course, but whatever the end of his life was like, he did not initially choose to go to Siberia, and he lived through hell before his life improved.

## x. works cited

- Ahlbom, Eva. Interview. Conducted by Rebecca Kiil. August 10, 2022.
- Ahlbom, Henrik. Interview and photos. Conducted by Rebecca Kiil. August 10, 2022.
- Alexievich, Svetlana. *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*. Dalkey Archive Press. McLean, Illinois. 2005.
- Alpert, J. L. (2015) “Enduring Mothers, Enduring Knowledge: On Rape and History.” *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*. (51)(2):296-311. Archive Press. 2005.
- Arendt, Hannah. “We Refugees,” in Marc Robinson, ed. *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*. Faber and Faber. Boston. 1994. p. 264–274.
- Atlas, Galit. *Emotional Inheritance: A Therapist, Her Patients, and the Legacy of Trauma*. Little, Brown Spark. New York. 2022.
- Chenier, Elise. “Oral History’s Afterlife.” In *Beyond Women’s Words: Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Katrina Srigley, Stacey Zembrzycki and Franca Iacovetta. Routledge. New York. 2018, p. 308.
- Dismukes, Donna. “The Forced Repatriation of Soviet Citizens: A Study in Military Obedience.” MA thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, December 1996.
- Fabritius, Kaj. Interview. Conducted by Rebecca Kiil. August 11, 2022.
- Fabritius, Kasper. Interview and photos. Conducted by Rebecca Kiil. August 10, 2022; August 11, 2022.
- Fabritius, Seija. Interview. Conducted by Rebecca Kiil. August 11, 2022.
- Kaevats, Aino Tuul. Interviews. Conducted by Rebecca Kiil. August 6, 2013; August 13, 2013; August 15, 2015.
- Kiil, Leevi. Interviews. Conducted by Rebecca Kiil. September 21, 2019; September 9, 2020; July 8, 2022.
- Kiil, Mall. Interviews. Conducted by Rebecca Kiil. October 27, 2018; August 10, 2022; August 25, 2022; December 12, 2022.
- Klingstedt, née Fabritius, Camilla. Map, Photo.
- Klingstedt, Gunnar. Interview and photos. Conducted by Rebecca Kiil. August 11, 2022.
- Lopez, Sofia Kiil. Interview. Conducted by Rebecca Kiil. August 10, 2022.
- Stauffer, Jill. *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*. Columbia University Press. New York. 2018.

Tippett, Krista. "Rachel Yehuda: How Trauma and Resilience Cross Generations." On Being Podcast. July 30, 2015. <https://onbeing.org/programs/rachel-yehuda-how-trauma-and-resilience-cross-generations-nov2017/#audio>

Tuul, Harald. Diary. 1945.

Wheeler, Winona. "Reflections on the Social Relations of Indigenous Oral History." *Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal People and Their Representations*, ed. David T. McNab. Wilfred Laurer University Press. Waterloo. Aboriginal Studies Series, 2005.