If you don’t learn a foreign language, you might starve.

That was the moral of one of the stories my grandpa told his daughter, my mother, especially when she got bad grades in German.

The story goes that when he began working at an Austrian household near the camp where he was imprisoned, they would call him: “Nicolaus, komm essen!” And Nikola, not speaking German, would start working harder and faster, thinking they were reprimanding him. He would then miss a chance to eat, and eventually go to sleep starving.

My mom never became conversant in German, despite learning it for eight years in school. I had German for four years in high school, and even lived in Germany for three months in 2000, when I was 26, but was only able to communicate with the Turkish grocery store owner in our equally broken versions of the language.

I had learned how to count from *ein* to *zehn* from grandpa Nikola. He’d sit me in his lap, and I’d face him. At four or five, my face was at the level of Nikola’s chest bone. I’d count the buttons on his shirt, repeating after him phonetically, in a thick Serbo-Croatian accent: *ajn, zvaj, draj, fir*, etc. It was a game as well: each time I got to ten, he’d turn off the light by leaning his head against the light switch. Then he’d declare that there had been a power cut, and I’d plead him to bring the electricity back. Then he’d click the light switch again with his head, and we’d both cheer. I was at the age when such games would never grow
old, and Nikola had patience to spare. This was in Borovo Naselje, the little industrial city in the center of Yugoslavia’s North-east, where Nikola moved after World War Two, and I was born to his older daughter thirty years later.

I was a child growing up in the socialist version of Yugoslavia, a version that originated in World War Two and guarded over a specific narrative of that war through literature, films, and comics, targeting everyone, starting with kids in the kindergarten. Every child watching TV series about the brave and handsome resistance fighters was eager to find out what their grandparents did in the war—how did they contribute to the victorious Tito’s partisans? I was happy to know that my grandmothers had indeed fought in the resistance, as civilians who supported partisans. One grandfather, my dad’s estranged father, was completely out of the picture, in another city, not on speaking terms with my dad or anyone else among us. Even when I wondered about him, the information was scant, suggesting less of a glorious role he played, if any, in World War Two. Nikola, the other grandfather, was the person I was closest to: he dressed me and fed me every morning my mom went to work, took me for walks, and taught me how to read.

One time during our walk, we climbed the steps to the movie theater to look at the posters. I could see my reflection in the dark glass of the theater’s façade, from my mary-janes and white-lace knee-highs to the pigtails. Passing by one of the posters, I recognized one detail as a letter I could actually decipher: “I.” In Serbo-Croatian, “I” is a word, too, although not the first-person pronoun like in English. In my native language, it means “and,” and it’s pronounced “e.” Saying the letter out loud, I could recognize it as a word that connects stuff.

Soon after I learned how to read all the other letters, I began going to kindergarten. Elementary school followed soon, as did lessons about World War Two, and at home I found out Nikola was a prisoner of Germans during that historic time. I didn’t ask what kind of a prisoner. Once I found out that he didn’t have a number tattooed on his arm, I simply concluded that he hadn’t been in a death camp, but in a work camp.

Perhaps it was my inattentiveness, but it must have also been the contradictions in the family lore that were throwing me off. I was a graduate student in North Carolina, and almost thirty
years old, when a fellow student sent out an e-mail to the department’s listserv asking if anyone else but him was a grandchild of Nazi camp survivors. I replied back saying my grandpa was in a work camp. But after I hit “send,” I began questioning my own understanding of Nikola’s story, and I e-mailed my mom to check that. She corrected me: it wasn’t a work camp but, according to the documents, a regular P.O.W. camp, more precisely Stalag 17B, where captured Allied soldiers were kept, including the Yugoslav ones.

Okay.

A big fan of Billy Wilder, I have seen *Stalag 17*, but that and a short story by Vonnegut was the extent of what I knew about that particular Third Reich institution.

I wondered why the words Stalag 17 never came up when I was growing up, at least not in my presence.

After Nikola’s death in late 1982, his wartime experience would come up once in a while when the news would announce that Germany was thinking of paying reparation to the victims of the Third Reich crimes. Such news seemed to have proliferated in Yugoslavia in the mid-to-late 80s, when the inflation rose, per capita income fell, and people could use hope for some hard currency, even if it meant digging out old traumas and potentially cashing in on them. Terse dialogues between my grandma and her daughters made me believe that Nikola was in a work camp. Their conversation would go something like this:

“Did he work in the village the entire time he was there?” my mom or my aunt would ask.

My grandma would begin to remember her husband’s stories, and she’d look in the distance somewhere beyond her living room. Her eyes would get intense behind her thick glasses. She’d frown a bit, her thin lips would become a sliver of pale flesh, and she’d run her fingers through her thin, silver, permed short hair. She’d sit in her chair, her back always straight, a small cup of Turkish coffee in front of her, artificial sweetener like tiny lozenges in a small plastic container at hand.

“Did he work the entire time? I don’t think so,” grandma would say and take a sip of her coffee. “Though all he ever talked about was how he worked in the village. But they probably put them to work only later in the war, when shit hit the fan in 1944.”
“Remember he said they didn’t have any blankets where they slept? They slept on bare cots,” my aunt would say.

All along, I might be only half-listening to the conversation, and instead play with my aunt’s long soft hair died mahogany red, pretending I was a top-notch Paris hair stylist. She suffered like a champ, later admiring my creation of half-teased-half-braided strands held together with a dozen clips in all the colors of the rainbow.

My mom kept thinking of the practical side. She’d say:

“Four years or one year, that’s a lot of unpaid, forced labor. Let me calculate how much we’d get if they were to pay him at today’s minimum wage. Let’s say it would be fourteen Deutschmarks per hour.”

She’d take a ball point pen out of her purse, and write on an empty cigarette pack, her blond bangs above her blue eyes, and once in a while she’d pause in order to tuck strands of her bob behind her ears.

And so on.

And so I was almost thirty when I finally asked my mom for some details. The story went that Nikola was doing the mandatory military service in the Royal Yugoslav Army when the country was attacked and swiftly occupied by Germany’s Wermacht. King Peter fled the country, the army was dismissed, and so Nikola found himself still uniformed, but without an army, in a small city of Novska, not far from his home village. But before he was able to return home to find a partisan unit to join, Wermacht troops arrested him and took him to a camp near Krems, Austria.

I was not yet eight when Nikola got ill and I didn’t get to see him a lot or talk to him the last year of his life, when I was old enough to begin asking him about his youth. So I piece the story together out of the family lore, out of facts and inconsistency, with some contradictions, and lots of gaps. Documents say that Nikola was a P.O.W., and then the family lore says that he was also working as a servant in a butcher’s household. The lore says the butcher’s wife was a kind woman who was sending him packages of flour and sausages up until Nikola met my grandma in 1948. Not only that, but the lady liked him and was hoping, apparently, that he’d marry her daughter once the war finished. That didn’t make sense to me, and I don’t mean the part about
the Third Reich disregarding the Geneva convention and forcing P.O.W.s to work.

When I was in eighth grade, a whole semester of my history class was about World War Two and the Yugoslav revolution. It was then that I began asking my grandma about her own memories, and about the stories she heard from Nikola, prodding for details, stories of courage preferably, or something.

As a teenager, I often spent weekends at my grandma’s place. She lived in a two-bedroom apartment with my aunt, my uncle, and my cousins, two toddlers at the time. My grandma slept on a couch that would pull out into a comfortable full bed in the living room, and I’d sleep with her. We’d lie on the bed and talk until she fell asleep, and then I’d read or watch late night TV.

“A Nazi lady would want a non-Aryan to marry her daughter? Come on,” I’d say to my grandma.

“Oh, she wasn’t a Nazi. Only her husband was a Nazi sympathizer.”

“How do you know she wasn’t a Nazi, too?”

“Well, your grandpa told me that when customers came to the shop, and they’d say ‘Heil Hitler,’ she’d just say ‘Guten tag.’”

“Aha,” I’d say, prompting grandma to continue.

“You know, they’d raise their arms,” grandma would say and raise her outstretched right arm in a mock-Nazi salute, “and the boss lady never saluted back.”

That’s how grandma referred to the Austrian woman: gazdarica, or the boss lady. No name ever came up, and I never asked. I assumed she was long dead, though maybe she was still alive at the time of my childhood; she could have easily been a healthy eighty-something-year-old out there in the Austrian countryside, with her own wartime memories. It certainly would have fitted my grandma’s notion of the boss lady, and she instilled a kind of respect for that phantom woman in me. It was as if the shadow of the Austrian’s authority, just the tip of it, reached me, the granddaughter of the prisoner working for her.

By the time I did learn that Nikola was a Stalag 17 inmate, grandma Milka had also passed away, and I couldn’t go back to her for more stories and clarifications.

Milka must have heard all the stories early on in her and Nikola’s marriage, when she told him her stories of narrowly escaping Nazis and Quislings as a teenager in the resistance,
sabotaging railroads and carrying messages from one group of partisans to the other in the thickly wooded hills surrounding her village. I doubt that they ever repeated those stories to each other afterward: that stoic generation did not dwell in the past. But stoicism was sometimes bought at the price of suppressing traumatic memories, and selectively transferring the story of their World War Two survival for their children and grandchildren, editing out the most horrific parts.

My mom remembers the stories they did tell her, and she even repeated the story of the non-Nazi boss lady to me over the phone. I was in Wilmington, North Carolina, and she was in Borovo. I had a calling card that bought me an hour and twenty minutes of long-distance calls to Croatia, so I asked mom every question I could think of, although she couldn’t answer all of them, at least not in detail. What were the conditions of life like? *(He said the difference between a P.O.W. and a death camp prisoner was that the P.O.W. didn’t have his number tattooed.)* When was he put to work? *(Probably later in the war.)* Was he able to write letters to his mother? *(His mother was illiterate.)* Was he working for the same family all the time? *(I don’t know.)* What exactly was he doing? *(I don’t know.)* The boss lady somehow was the only even slightly tangible detail of the story.

“How come everyone thinks that lady wasn’t a Nazi? I mean, other than her not saying ‘Heil Hitler?’” I asked mom.

“Well, your grandpa told me that the lady kept sending him packages with food. Even after he moved to Borovo and got a job in the factory. Until he met your grandma.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It seems she was hoping he would marry one of her daughters.”

“Are you sure?”

“Look,” mom said, not out of impatience, but to collect her thoughts and memories. “What I know is that after he sent the lady a letter saying he was getting married, the packages from the boss lady stopped coming.”

I had never heard that from grandma—maybe that was a detail Nikola only told his daughters.

“Are you there?” mom asked.

“I’m listening,” I said and took a drag of my cigarette.

“Are you smoking?” mom asked me.
“Yes, are you?”
“I am, but you shouldn’t. I’ll go over there and give you a beating!”

“Anyway, you were saying about the packages?”
“Well, apparently she was hoping to hitch your grandpa and her daughter. Anyway, the fact they had kept in touch obviously meant she wasn’t a Nazi, right? I mean, grandpa was a communist, a sympathizer even as a kid, before the war.”

“Mom, you know what I think?”
“What?”

“Maybe Nikola had a thing with the boss lady.”
My mom gasped and then burst out laughing.

“Get out of here!”

“Why not? If you were anti-Nazi and your husband was pro-Nazi, the husband would be a total turn off. But a young pro-communist man, a P.O.W.? How old was Nikola when he was captured?”

“Let’s see, he was born in 1919, captured in 1941—twenty-two.”

“See, he wasn’t too young. What else do you remember? Where did he sleep?”

“Oh, he slept in the barracks, absolutely. They’d take him to the boss lady’s household in the morning, and take him back to the barracks in the evening.”

“So he worked for her during the day, in the house and around?”

“As far as I know.”

“That would explain how he learned German.”

“Right. I remember one story about her. She gave him some blankets, when she heard they slept on the bare bunks with practically no heat. But the guards didn’t allow the blankets in.”

“And, so?”

“So she was furious, but she couldn’t do anything about it.”

I began speculating:

“She probably fed him while he was at her house. When the guards weren’t around.”

“She must have. She treated him like a human being.”

“But really he was her slave.”

“She did keep sending those packages and letters,” mom said, still feeling the need to defend the woman she never met. Or
maybe to defend her father’s story, the piece of the story with which he had entrusted her.

But one thought wouldn’t let me be: what if the boss lady is fiction? There is no evidence: no name one could look up, no letters she allegedly wrote. What if, in order to satisfy his children’s curiosity and yet spare them from the truth and spare himself from traumatic memories, Nikola weaved a tale of a benevolent Austrian woman and him as her P.O.W. beneficiary? He was an immaculate storyteller; I can vouch for that. When I slept over at grandpa and grandma’s, he’d stay up with me while grandma was in deep sleep on her side of the bed, and tell elaborate tales, parts of which I’d remember later on when we read the real deal at school. Medieval princes and princesses would fight with Greek mythical beasts, William Tell would spar with the Turkish trickster Nasraddin—anything was possible in those epics composed of folk tales and legends he had absorbed and reconfigured for his entertainment and mine.

If I could only find proof that a lady I’ve been hearing about might have existed. I browse the titles of memoirs of P.O.W.s in the library catalogue of my current school in Chicago: Damn Cold and Starving, Given Up for Dead, Nightmare Memoir . . . .

Even compared with the movie Stalag 17, what with soldiers clowning around in the face of horror, betrayal, and madness, Nikola’s story sounds like a best-case scenario. But perhaps Nikola did tell the truth; the negative parts of his experience might have been unspeakable, so he omitted those and emphasized the positives, but it was a kind of truth, incomplete but real.

There is a picture of him, and on the back it says Austria, 1945. He doesn’t look starved, he just looks like the thin young version of Nikola I remember: pointy chin, short brown hair combed back, closely shaved face with a narrow hooked nose and high cheekbones. Most likely, his life in the last year of World War Two was a surreal walk back and forth between the home of that benevolent boss lady during the day, and the horrors of the camp every evening, night, and morning. As for his first three years as a P.O.W., there couldn’t have been a single comforting thing.

I will never be able to imagine how that must have been. But maybe I should collect as much information as possible and piece together a facsimile of the complete story Nikola never
told. For starters, I ask my mom to scan and e-mail me the Red Cross document Nikola received when he came back to Yugoslavia in 1945. I look at it for the first time in my life, now that I am thirty-four, and in the background the radio is talking about rendition, Guantanamo Bay, decapitations, kidnappings.

The Red Cross document says Nikola was captured on April 7, 1941, and released from the camp on May 9, 1945, and that he arrived back home on July 12 of the same year.

So along with answering some basic questions, the document opens up another huge one: what in the world was Nikola doing during those two months before arriving home? I call my mom, she chuckles and says:

“Well, he told the authorities in Yugoslavia that he walked home from Austria and that it took him two months.”

“Really?”

“Of course, he made it up, it would have been dangerous for him to tell the authorities the truth,” my mom says with a voice filled with conspiracy, and pauses dramatically. Always the suspense master, my mom.

“And the truth was?”

“Well, the truth was,” she says, her voice nonchalant all of a sudden, “The boy wanted to try out the life in the big city, in Vienna.”

“He told you that?”

“Yeah, but I guess something didn’t work out, so he returned home.”

“He must have been awfully homesick,” I offer.

“Yes, but remember, he owned nothing back home, poor as a church mouse, and his mom and sister were at the mercy of his uncles, who in turn were poor too and could perhaps only take care of their sons.”

“So he thought . . . ”

“He thought, maybe I can find work in Vienna, after all, he had learned German.”

“So did he find work, I mean how did he survive even those two months?”

“I don’t know,” my mom says.

“He didn’t tell you much about his experiences, did he? Probably wanted to spare you.”
“To be honest, I never asked him much. I guess I should have,” my mom says.

With the absence of facts, we begin speculating. Maybe he wanted to send for his mom and his little sister and bring them to Vienna. But what could that bombed-out wasteland hold in store, other than espionage and black market wheeling and dealing? Maybe it was dangerous for him to return to his village. Maybe it was dangerous not to return. Maybe the boss lady’s husband was drafted and killed in the final year of the war, and Nikola stayed on to protect the women from the Russian soldiers.

I don’t know if I’ll ever find out. But maybe it’s time for me to master some German and start bracing myself for a trip.