

## Researching One in Six Million

Hilary Selznick

This article explores the research methods used in a book-length memoir. More specifically, I address how the research involved in writing a memoir about my grandmother's history as a Holocaust survivor differs from the research strategies I learned as an undergraduate student writing a research paper. Instead of concentrating on a controversial topic or issue, the focus in memoir writing is on the personal. I used mostly primary research methods in order to retrace my grandmother's history, including: interviews, archival research, and searching old photo albums and regulatory documents. Although secondary research, which included the searching of library databases, was useful, primary research was more necessary for my memoir. Through this process, I came to the conclusion that the genre of the research project dictates which research methods will be most effective.

It has been almost twenty years since we buried my grandmother under a large maple tree. I like to think she is happy there, returned back to the earth and to the husband she had loved, who died nearly thirty years before her.

My grandmother was a difficult woman: rough mannered, quick-tempered, and angry at life. She was overly critical. She could be mean and hurtful. My father resented her, my sister feared her, and for some unexplainable reason, I was wildly in love with her. Maybe it was because my mother often told me that I reminded her of all the good parts of my grandmother.

In my writing, my grandmother always showed up—uninvited. She found her way into the lines of my poetry, the characters of my fiction, and recently there she was again, smack in the middle of the memoir I thought I was writing about my own life. Finally, I gave in and realized that in order to tell my own story I had to first tell my grandmother's.

I began with my mother. Surely my mother could tell me all the things I wanted to know about my grandmother's history. I knew only a little: she

survived the Holocaust by somehow managing to escape a concentration camp and board an illegal ship to Russia carrying other Jewish escapees; she married a handsome Polish soldier; and gave birth to my mother after the war in the U.S. Occupied Zone of Germany. But it wasn't enough. What happened to her in between those events, and how did those events turn her into the person I would meet years later?

I called my mother and prepared to ask her a ton of questions. Next to me sat a thick pad of legal paper and a fountain pen. She answered the phone in her typical manner: "Is this my daughter who left me to live in Michigan?" she said.

"Yes, mother that's the one," I sighed. "I'm calling because I want to know more about Bubby."

"What do you want to know?" she asked. The sound of what must be pages of newspaper crackled into the phone.

"Um, what concentration camp was she in? Who helped her escape? How did she meet grandfather? What did she do in Russia? What happened to the rest of her family?" I said quickly, momentarily forgetting the importance of breathing.

"I already told you everything I know," my mother said flatly. Okay, so I might have asked her these questions before, but this time I was looking for a different answer, a better answer. "Didn't you ever ask her any questions?" I urged.

"She didn't want to talk about it," my mother said loudly into the phone. I guess she thought her words would have more meaning if she shouted them.

"I think I'm going to do some research," I said, excitement rising into my voice. I grabbed the fountain pen hard and plopped it loudly onto the pad.

"Fine," my mother replied, more newspaper rustling. "But if you ask me, it's a waste of time."

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My excitement waned when I realized I had no idea how to do research on my grandmother. The only time I did research was in school and I knew that researching for a memoir had to be different. I wasn't arguing a topic or analyzing a piece of literature; instead, I was trying to uncover a life and to find something that might explain the connection I felt with my grandmother.

My first instinct was to search Google. But what would I type into the search bar? My grandmother's name? Holocaust Survivors? Victims of World

War II? I knew none of these searches would work. My grandmother's name was spelled various ways in many different languages and she wasn't someone famous. Holocaust Survivors was so broad of a search that it came up with approximately 870,000 hits on Google. I recently read the amazingly brilliant memoir and Holocaust studies book *The Lost: Searching for Six in Six Million*, by journalist Daniel Mendelsohn and remembered that he talked about his research process in the book.

I found *The Lost* on one of my bookshelves and took it down. I started to read my underlined notes and came across the line that said it took Mendelsohn nineteen years to research and write his book. I was immediately distressed. Nineteen years! I didn't have nineteen years! Who had time to write a book for nineteen years! I decided to read on anyway. Mendelsohn went on to explain that for most of those nineteen years the Internet wasn't invented yet, and that once it was his search went much faster. Ok, so maybe there was still hope. He said he began his research process by looking at primary sources, including: historical records, old photographs, interviews, and an extended visit to the Polish town his uncle and his uncle's children lived in before the Holocaust. Then he wrote letters, made long distance phone calls, and eventually searched the Internet. I decided to follow by example. Unfortunately, that meant another call to mom.

"Fine," my mother said distractedly, "I'll have your father go into the basement and look for grandmother's photo albums. But I have to warn you, most of the pages are torn and some of the pictures fell out of their pockets."

"Yes, mother," I replied. I heard the sound of the TV in the background and I felt exasperated that my mother was giving me only half of her attention. "Mom!" I screamed into the phone. "What about documents? Don't you have any of grandmother's papers left?"

"There is a small file box in the back bedroom," she said, "I'll get your father to look for it."

I made plans to fly to Philadelphia to see things for myself. My dad handed me the small metal file box and tears formed in my eyes as I thought about how sad it was for a whole life to be reduced to a tiny box. Inside was my grandfather's death certificate, both my grandparent's naturalization papers, a marriage license written in Polish, some financial papers, and a German identification card with a snapshot of my grandfather's face. The letters UNRRA were stamped onto the card and the word Liephem appeared at the top. My mother didn't know what the letters stood for, but she thought Liephem was the refugee camp she was born in. I asked my father to make me photocopies of the papers so I could take them back to Michigan with me and get them translated.

Next, we looked through the old photo album. My mother emptied the contents of the plastic bag my father brought up from the basement and out fell loose black and white photographs and empty envelopes. The black felt paper stuck to the back of most of the photos in the album covering the descriptions on the backs. My mother talked me through the pictures she recognized: one was of a party where a crowd of people were smiling at the photographer. "I think this was taken at a wedding. The small bald man in the corner is your Uncle Hyman," she said as she squinted through her glasses. "He was your grandparent's sponsor and your father and I named you after him." I looked down at my great-uncle and felt a rush of emotions, mostly gratitude for the man who saved my grandparent's lives by bringing them to America and into his home.

There were plenty of photographs. I saw my grandmother in her twenties, thirties, forties. She was smiling and youthful. She looked nothing like the gray-haired woman I grew up with, the one full of anger and weakened by cancer. In most of the pictures there were posed groups of people. My grandfather gathered together with a sea of other men wearing police uniforms, women gathered around a water well, men and women around a dining room table enjoying the food in front of them. But, there were no children. I found a picture of my Bubby in a wedding gown, the handsome man with the arm around her was my grandfather looking smart in his police uniform, and a crowd of friends smiling in the background. The happy event almost made it possible to ignore the lines on the guest's faces, their thin bodies showing through their ill-fitting clothing, the loss that they never talked about.

My mother and I managed to find some pictures with dates and places on them. Most of the descriptions on the backs of the photos were written in Hebrew. I told my mother I wished I paid more attention in Hebrew school and she said so did she. Before giving the photo album back to my father, I slipped the picture of my grandmother's wedding into a yellowed envelope along with a few others where she seemed happy. I would return to these photos over and over again through the years when I felt like giving up, when the research became much harder than I ever expected.

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After looking at the photos, I wasn't sure what to do next. I decided to go to the Free Library of Philadelphia downtown and look through the catalog and some databases. I took a stack of books off the shelves and sat with them for hours at a table. I looked at the annotated bibliographies at the end of articles. One led me to the book *Waiting for Hope: Jewish Displaced Persons in Post-World War II Germany*. The book listed all of the displaced person camps including Liephem. It explained that the letters UNRRA found on my

grandparents' pictures stood for the United Nation's Refugee Rehabilitation Association that oversaw the DP camps and it led me to another organization, JDR: the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee that fed and clothed the refugees in the camps. For the first time, this book gave me the opportunity to see what my grandmother's life was like all those years earlier and helped me to understand the cause of so much of her anger and suffering. My love for her grew stronger.

At times, none of the research techniques I used worked. Emails saying I am sorry but I cannot help you, calls left unreturned, the archive search at the JDR in New York City turned up empty. And I couldn't find any of my grandparents' family members on the famous Israeli Museum, Yad Vashem's Shoah Victims' Database. But then good news came. Bits of information came from unexpected places. A year after I filed my request for information about my grandparents, emails came from the Holocaust Survivors and Victims' Resource Center at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C.: nineteen documents listing my grandmother's name and fourteen for my grandfather. Among the PDFs they sent was a list of persons, including my grandparents, who were registered at Leipheim DP Camp as of April 29, 1947; a list of persons who emigrated from Bremerhaven, Germany, to New York, USA on November 14, 1949; and a list of survivors of Warsaw with my grandparents' names found through the International Tracking Services in Bad Arolsen, Germany in 1947. My hands shook every time I received an email. The excitement and relief of seeing my grandmother's name refuelled my search.

There is still so much more to do. I need to find a translator for all these documents, I still haven't found the name of the concentration camp my Bubby escaped from, and I need to find grant money to make a trip to Yad Vashem in Israel and to Warsaw to search for the place my grandmother called home. But I can't tell you how good it felt to send my mother these missing pieces of her parents' lives. And when I called her to tell her that I found the name of her grandmother, the woman she never knew she was named after, she thanked me for the first time in my life for not following her advice.



**Hilary Selznick** is originally from Philadelphia where she ate yummy cheesesteaks with Cheez Whiz, snacked on Amish soft-pretzels, and ran up the art museum stairs like Rocky. She had been living in Michigan for five years with her husband and two step-children and is still struggling with being a Midwesterner. For example, she never seems to locate Kalamazoo on her hand, which seems to be the main form of communication between Michiganders. Hilary recently started her PhD program in English Studies at Illinois State University in the town of Normal. This has caused much laughter in her family and leaves Hilary to question why every town she moves to makes for great T-shirt slogans. Hilary earned her MFA from Western Michigan University in creative nonfiction where she taught first-year writing for three years. Prior to Western, Hilary received a Masters in Education and taught grade school where she zippered coats and lined up girls to take them to the bathroom. She is currently working on a full-length memoir about her grandmother's history as a Holocaust survivor.