

FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS

Madelaine Helga Zadik



[l-r] Helga, the author's grandmother, the author's mother, 1925 or 1926

MY MOTHER GAZED ENDLESSLY at old photographs. She assembled her childhood portrait gallery in an album that had a wooden cover and was bound together with a strip of leather. The images were inserted into black photographic corners adhered to black pages. In white ink, my mother carefully labeled each picture. They were remnants of a bygone era, evidence of a precious time before her world was totally destroyed.

I would sit beside my mother, totally enrapt, as the photographs sparked memories of her idyllic childhood. The stories about her and her sister Helga oozed out of her. How could I not be enchanted by these two adorable sisters? Mom with that bow in her hair; Helga with those big eyes capturing everyone's attention. At five and three, the two of them were filled with the innocence of youth, not yet tuned into the harsh realities of the world. Two years later, they sported crowns of flowers.

Clearly the photos were staged. Adoring parents paid a professional photographer to capture these images of their cherished daughters, Helga and Ursula. Another photo [left] showed the two sisters standing on either side of their mother when they were five and seven. I love the impish grin on my mother's face.

My mother recounted their adventures and country outings in the family car. Mom and Helga played in the streams in the nearby mountains, building dams, making water wheels,



[l-r] Helga and Ursula, the author's mother, June 14, 1923



[l-r] Ursula and Helga, June 1925

climbing from stone to stone, falling into the water for fun. After the depression hit, they had to sell their car, but the family still went on picnics in the country, putting armchairs and blankets in the truck that they used for their business. Helga had a beloved

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Else Beyer, the author's
grandmother and mother
of Helga and Ursula, who
kept this photograph on her
dresser for many years.



teddy bear named *Woolbacke* (literally “wool cheeks”), which she brought with her wherever they went. On one of their trips with their parents’ friends and daughter Eva, *Woolbacke* got lost on the hiking trail, but no one noticed his absence until they got back. Poor Helga made such a fuss that Eva’s father hiked back to where they had been and saved the day by finding the teddy.

Their enormous city apartment hosted fun costume parties, and looking at those photographs, my mother could still name every adult

and child in their festive gear. My mother recalled how she and Helga carried their bicycles up the stairs to the apartment, where they rode their bicycles up and down the long hallway from their parents’ bedroom at one end to the children’s room at the other. Helga and my mother performed gymnastics on chin-up bars in that hallway. They fought each other with toothbrushes. They gave names to bottles that they lined up on windowsills and created personalities for them as if they were

Petzer 1937.
Helga is
on the far right
and Ursula
on the far left.



dolls. My mother described Helga as mischievous and oh so stubborn.

My mother credited many of the fun times of her childhood to her mother’s caring nature. My grandmother taught her daughters to feed baby canaries, having converted a room in their apartment into an aviary. She showered both Helga and my mother with small presents on their birthdays. She engaged them with stories about dwarves in the woods.

My mother situated a framed photograph of her mother in a place of prominence [left]. I would stand in front of that portrait and gaze into my grandmother’s eyes. If only I could have known her firsthand. In actuality, her love was transmitted to me through my mother and through these photographs.

Since I was only five when my grandfather died, I didn’t really know

him either. Mom’s recollections said a lot about him—how he fired his rifle into the air in WWI because he was a pacifist; and how he loved to go exploring, driving down a road just to see where it led, a tradition my mother carried on with me. We were always finding ourselves in places we had never been before or heading down unknown paths, excited to see where we would end up. One time, in Acadia National Park, we veered off the trail, thinking we were taking a shortcut, but we almost got lost. Mom always laughed about it, but I would never forget that incident where we almost didn’t find our way back. My mother had a positive take on it, saying, “We still made it to the car before dark!”

A photograph labeled Petzer 1937 was taken in what they called the *Reisengebirge*, literally “giant mountains”

in German. They were all so fit, skiing up and down the mountains without any ski lifts. At that time, Petzer was in Czechoslovakia, but today the location is a ski resort town in the Czech Republic called Pec pod Snežkou. My mother and Helga were part of the resistance, and their ski trips became missions. They smuggled anti-Hitler papers across the border into Germany. Printed on thin tissuelike paper, they were rolled up and inserted into their ski poles. Perhaps the very ones in the photo.

This photo was taken shortly before Helga's arrest in January 1938. The sisters were eighteen and sixteen. Mom identified the boy on the left as Helga's friend Jinny. He escaped to England and survived the war there. This photo documents the last time he ever saw Helga. She was convicted of high treason for the smuggling operation. My mother was also arrested, but miraculously managed to be acquitted and was able to flee Germany. And what of the other young man? His identity is lost to history. Was he also involved in the political activities and caught? Did he survive? Did my mother know what happened to him? Is there anyone in the world who ever thinks about him? And who took the photo? All mysteries that remain unsolved.



Photographs and Mom's memories filled her with joy and comfort. My

mother needed to keep those good memories close, to remember the time before Hitler came to power and before she and Helga were imprisoned. Before Helga served a three-and-a-half-year sentence, before she was murdered at the Ravensbrück Womens Concentration Camp. Perhaps that was the reason my mother safeguarded all those photos and transported them thousands of miles around the world, first to Shanghai, where she and my father found refuge for eight years, and then to the United States where they finally landed in 1947. The photographs were more precious than anything else she could have taken with her. She always instructed me, "If there's a fire, grab the photographs."

I sensed how happy my mother and Helga were in the photos. It helped me understand why my mother bought herself skis when I was a kid, wooden ones with leather bindings and metal buckles that she strapped onto her snow boots. She loved skiing down Devil's Hill in Fort Tryon Park, just across the street from our apartment building in northern Manhattan. And in her forties, she even learned to waterski!

One framed photo of Helga hung on our apartment wall as I was growing up. It was the last photo my mother had of Helga. Helga at sixteen. Through all the other photos, I knew Helga in black and white, but this one had been colorized, so she had pinkish cheeks and brown hair, and was wearing a blue

blouse as she stared out from a simple black picture frame, frozen in time.

All that photographic documentation grounded me in where I came from. I could imagine the place that molded my mother and shaped her personality. I was lucky to have these images and the delightful tales behind each one. I contemplated going to that mountaintop on the border of what is now Poland and the Czech Republic and exploring the place, but what could I possibly find? Might I feel Helga's spirit atop the mountain?

I was haunted by the ghosts. The images brought into focus the pain of what was lost. They reminded me of all I could never know, all the questions never to be answered. I had to be content with stories I told myself.

Yes, if we had a fire, I would go for the photos. My mother taught me well. Everything else was replaceable.



But what is truth in a photograph? Each image captures just one instant. At the moments these photographs were taken, my mother and Helga were laughing and happy. But is that the whole story? We don't usually take photos when people are crying or in pain or fighting. We don't want to record those moments, even if they are part of our stories. Thus, photos lie by omission. We must look elsewhere for a deeper truth. Who will tell those stories? ♦

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