

My Mathematical Father: A Life in Numbers

by **Karen Galatz**

My father was a mathematical genius. He could calculate long columns of numbers in his head in a flash, count cards at a Las Vegas blackjack table, and estimate the number of pennies in a jar within, well, a few pennies.

I, on the other hand, can barely operate a calculator and cannot convert kilometers into miles. Yet when I think of my father's life, it is through numbers that I can best recount his story.

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July 4, 1931: My parents meet at Coney Island. There for a blind date with my mother's best friend, my father said he took one look at my mother and "That was it." He wooed her with hot dogs, salt water taffy, and cotton candy, took her for a ride on the Whip, and then held her hair back as she threw up all that food. There were fireworks then and there were fireworks throughout the five decades they were married.

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Shortly after meeting my mother, Dad took off "hoboing" around the country. Not for long. He sent a telegraph to his brother asking for money to get home so he could court my mother. On his return to New York, he went straight to my mother's home. Eight months later they married.

Some fifty-four years later, as we gathered around the kitchen table telling stories after my father's funeral, my Grandma recalled meeting her future—and

favorite—son-in-law. Standing at the front door for the first time, he asked Grandma to please get her "sister." After so many years, she was still charmed by that first encounter.

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That's how old Mom was when she married my father. Already a senior in high school, she told my father she was sixteen. Right before they eloped, she doctored her birth certificate to support that lie. My grandmother accompanied my parents to the rabbi, but waited outside so she, in turn, could tell her own lie: "I didn't see anything."

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That's how many days passed before my grandfather found out that his beloved Dottie was married and would not go to college as he had hoped.

They had planned to tell Grandpa of the wedding after Mom graduated from high school. In the meantime, Dad would spend the night at the house, ostensibly in my uncle's room. But one night, Grandpa, who wasn't feeling well, looked in on all the children. Just as he put his hand on the door to my mother's room, Grandma saw him and rushed him back to bed, saying he was too sick to be up and about. When he commented that my father wasn't in my uncle's room, Grandma said he was hallucinating because of a high fever and that, of course, Julius was sound asleep beside their own snoring Henry.

The next morning Grandpa was told of the marriage. He loved my father, but still, this old-fashioned, yet somehow progressive, Eastern European immigrant had held such high hopes for his firstborn child. He was bitterly disappointed that there would be no college for his brilliant daughter. No high school diploma either.

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Two years into my parents' marriage, my father got a surprise. An insurance annuity Grandpa had purchased for my mother's college tuition was available to be cashed on her eighteenth birthday. On Mom's birthday, my father went to claim the fifty dollars. The insurance man said the policy wouldn't mature for another two years. My father said, "But she's eighteen." The man put his hand on Dad's shoulder and said, "Son, you'd better go home and talk to your wife." It was only then, two years into the marriage, that my mother admitted her true age.

Here's one of my favorite stories about my parents: they were in the back of a car, doing what young people generally do in the back of a parked car late at night. A policeman knocked on the window and sternly told my father, "Son, if you cannot control yourself, you had better marry this girl." My father sheepishly replied, "We are married. We just couldn't wait to get home." The policeman walked away without giving them a ticket.

1930

Sometime in the late 1930s, mobster Meyer Lansky organized youth gangs to break up meetings of the pro-Nazi German-American Bund held in Yorkville, a section of NYC. I know from my oldest brother that my father and my mother's brother, Henry, were part of those gangs. My brother would describe with great pride how Dad and Uncle Henry would come home all bloody and beat up, but also victorious and happy.

From Lansky came this recollection: "The stage was decorated with a swastika and a picture of Adolf Hitler. The speakers started ranting. There were only fifteen of us, but we went into action. We threw some of them out the windows. Most of the Nazis panicked and ran out. We chased them and beat them up. We wanted to show them that Jews would not always sit back and accept insults."¹

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Street fighting was one thing, but pro sports was another. Three is the number of times my father boxed professionally. He quit because his arms were too short "from smoking cigars at an early age" (or so he claimed).

However, short arms had no effect on his abilities in track and field and he won two gold watches for setting jumping records in New York City. One of those watches hangs on my bedroom wall in an old-fashioned gold-flecked round frame with faded navy velvet backing.

Dad also could pitch a mean softball. Early in my parents' Depression-era marriage, my father worked in a White Castle hamburger joint. He and the other workers augmented the menu and sold sandwiches and snacks on the side that their wives and mothers prepared to bring in extra income. When the owner of the White Castle found out, he fired all the men except my father, who could pitch, hit, and run. The White Castle team won the citywide championship that summer. The next day, my father lost his job.

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That is the number of times my otherwise talkative father spoke to me about his parents. From my mother, I learned a couple of sad facts: First, that Daddy's mother had been ill and hospitalized most of his life. She died when he was sixteen. My father was already working by then to help support the family, but, according to my mother, he harbored great guilt that he hadn't done more to "save her" and that whenever he woke up from a bad dream, he called out her name.

From my mother, I got the impression that my father's father was a stern man. Maybe the times required it. Maybe it was his nature. When there wasn't enough food to go around, my grandfather ate first. He was the breadwinner. He needed his strength.

And when it came to helping my teenage newlywed parents, it was my mother's family who did so. Night after night, my mother's father would sit in that White Castle while my father washed down the counters, the walls, the windows, and the floors. "My poor Julius," Grandpa would say. After my father was fired, Grandpa took him into the family electrical business.

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Years later, working for my grandfather, my impatient father tried hoisting a massive air conditioning unit without help. He broke his back in multiple places and was hospitalized in a full-body cast for six months.

Even though I was a little girl and visiting rules were strict, hospital staff allowed me to sneak into his room to cheer him up. To pass the time, he counted my emerging freckles. First, there were five freckles; another time, we counted seventeen, then thirty-one. We measured time in freckles. Time in-between visits. Time trapped in a cast. Trapped in a bed. Trapped in a room and in his head.

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No, not the convenience store, but my father's lifelong love of craps. My mathematical father could count cards and win at blackjack, but that was too easy. But craps, that was exciting, unpredictable. He craved excitement. It was the thrill of the unpredictable that held him captive.

He described gambling to a college friend of mine as "giving a license to somebody to take your money."

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When gamblers win, they buy jewelry. It's a quick way to get rid of cash before the irresistible urge to gamble strikes again. Through the years my mother accumulated many sparkling pieces of hard-won gambling-earned baubles.

One evening my father jubilantly came home with a diamond ring. Mom refused it, saying she already had a beautiful engagement ring and that he should take it back to the store for cash. He refused and told her to give it to twelve-year-old me. Mom explained that was ridiculous. He then told her to put it away and give it to me when I was older. And two decades later, she did that, giving it to my fiancé, who, in turn, presented it to me. A family heirloom, Las Vegas style.

1 x "Y"

I don't have an accurate number here, but every time Dad needed cash, he pawned his 24-karat gold watch. That watch was in and out of pawnshops dozens of times through the years. When he died, a pawn ticket was in his wallet. We went to the store and re-claimed the watch for the last time. Now my son has it.

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As in "I'll be back in five minutes," code for my father leaving us at some fancy "comped" hotel-casino dinner to gamble. He was always gone more than 5 minutes. If he looked flushed when he returned, it was a good sign. He had won. If he plopped a big stack of chips on the table in front of my mother, that was even better. It meant he had won *and* was content to quit for the night. If he was sweating and pale, well, that meant our "free" dinner had actually cost a lot of money.

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My two oldest brothers were twenty-one and eighteen when I was born. The oldest was already in law school when I arrived. Chagrined, he handed out cigars just as his classmates did—except they were celebrating the births of their children, not siblings. My brother used to say I was almost named "Surprise." My father would just smile and say I was the result of the best afternoon he ever took off from work.

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That's the approximate number of schools I went to. We moved back and forth between NY and Las Vegas multiple times.

We moved West when my parents got sick of the relatives, the cold weather, and the traffic my father faced driving between Long Island and NYC, where he operated his electrical business.

We moved East when my parents missed the change of seasons, the family, and there was a crop of new Broadway shows to see. The other, not publicly stated reason for the moves back East, were the times when my father's gambling proved to be too big a distraction from his electrical business.

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The most years I lived in any one place until I married.

I didn't mind all those moves. I thought it was fun. I loved playing "Hide and Seek" amid the mountains of the crumpled wrapping paper and moving boxes.

One brother lived in New York; one in Las Vegas, and the youngest brother moved with us each time. So, I had family everywhere, ready-made friends if you will.

And while I don't remember much drama between my parents about these zig-zag moves, my now-gone, oldest brother did. He said the moves became painful for our mother and that was why she went on spending frenzies at each new house. She was obsessed with getting us settled as quickly as possible. I always thought she just liked decorating. My father gambled. My mother shopped. It seemed a reasonable arrangement in my happy, clueless childhood bubble.

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Even though gambling was my father's preferred means of making money, he had a variety of work adventures and stories. Here are four of them.

One: During Prohibition, he drove a truck from Canada or maybe just upstate New York bringing liquor to joints in NYC. He had already started going bald and always wore a hat (even at the movies), but at the time he wore it for another reason. He hid a gun inside, hoping to see and capture Al Capone and claim the reward.



Two: During WWII, my father worked on merchant ships. One night near the Panama Canal he had a premonition and slept on the deck, cradling a knife he had grabbed from the kitchen. The boat was torpedoed and started sinking fast. Dad did a running jump off the deck and floated in the water for a day or two. Rescued by a US military ship, he was brought to a naval base outside of NYC and questioned to make sure he wasn't trying to sneak into the country as a German spy. When he was released and my family went to get him, he was standing there, midwinter, barefoot, in a sailor's pants and pea coat—both several sizes too small.

Three: In the early 1960s, my father was a foreman on the Titan Missile construction project in Arizona. He hadn't even finished junior high school, but my

father was smart. He pointed out a design flaw, which if it hadn't been fixed, would have been catastrophic.

The construction site was dangerous. There were rattlesnakes on the roads where the men walked and in the construction tunnels they descended to work. The men drew sticks to see who would go down first, knowing that the first down would be the one to startle the snakes. They all carried guns to shoot the snakes, but sometimes the deadly snakes were quicker than they were.

Four: After completing some basic electric work in the home of the great pianist Vladimir Horowitz, my father started to leave. Horowitz waved his elegant arm in an offhand manner and said, "Just send a bill." My father replied, "Maestro, I'll skip the bill if you would play something for me." The usually prickly Horowitz gestured for my father to sit and proceeded to play for about an hour.

My father was comfortable with princes and paupers. He was buddies with the Ambassador from Indonesia and equally close with the janitor who cleaned apartment buildings my father managed. His two favorite restaurants were the Bacchanal Room at Caesar's Palace and a short-order coffee shop on the Lower East Side. Both places had limited seating, but the service and the ambiance were decidedly different.

My father's full name was Julius David Galatz. Everybody, even kids, called him Big Julie. A boyfriend of mine gifted him with "business" cards that read:

Big Julie
Poet-Gambler

\$1.25

Aside from that fancy gold watch, which he viewed more as collateral than adornment, Big Julie had only one true personal luxury: Prince Philip Macanudo

cigars. I don't remember what they cost in the '80s, but they were and are pretty pricey. Christmas, Hanukkah, birthdays and Father's Day, we kids would each buy him a box. We wouldn't let him smoke the stinky stogies in the house, mind you, but we would buy them. One year, I bought him the obligatory Christmas box and also gave him a handmade coupon book "good for one box per month" for the entire year. For once, my gregarious father was speechless.

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Cigars always for Dad, but for me, the best gifts I ever received from him were two lessons in kindness—offered spontaneously without judgement or condescension.

Once I complained that my father's brother, my Uncle Lou, had called somebody a "Spic." My father agreed it was a terrible word, but he also told me about Lou's hard life and the troubles he had faced including the loss of his wife in a horrible accident.

He added that Louie had some fun times too including a friendship with that "Red Hot Mama" Sophie Tucker. From all that, I realized an important lesson—people have complex lives and that I shouldn't be quick to judge.

My father re-enforced this lesson a few months later, when he handed me a Nazi party membership book. When I came to the page with the member's name on it, I saw it belonged to my father's close friend. "How can you be friends with a Nazi?" I fumed with all the righteous indignation only a twelve-year-old can feel. My father smiled; then said, "'Fritz' was just a little boy in a small village when the Nazis came to power. His membership consisted of wearing a hat, a tie and a pin. He marched in the town square and saluted. He didn't kill anybody. He didn't hurt anybody. He was just a little boy then. He's a good man."

Another time, thanks to my father's billiards' skills, I was "gifted" with that second lesson about kindness. Dad was playing pool one holiday with a dreadful relative. After a while the relative came into the living room, gloating how he had just beat "the Great Galatz." On the car ride home, I asked my father about it. "You let him win, didn't you? Why?" Smiling, Daddy replied, "It meant so much to him."

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In fifth grade, my father played hooky from school for six months. Mornings, he went to the Bronx Zoo; afternoons, he hung out at pool halls. When the truant officer finally showed up at the house, my grandfather gave Dad a beating.

The next morning, limping into school, he met with his teacher. She gave him the six months of schoolwork he missed to study. He came back the next day asking what else he had missed. The kindly teacher said he could not possibly have studied everything in one night. She begged him not to lie and risk another beating from his father. My father swore he had reviewed all the material. She tested him. He got a perfect score and was written up as a "boy genius" in some long-defunct NYC newspaper. I never saw the article, but I'm sure it didn't reference his epic pool skills.

6

My father dropped out of school in the sixth grade to help support his immigrant family. It was a shame. Not only were his math skills astonishing, but he also had a photographic memory. He quoted philosophers and poets all the time. Each Sunday he read *The New York Times* from start to finish. It was his Bible and his refuge. For leisure, he would pick up a volume of the family encyclopedia and start reading from page one.

My father didn't just read poetry. He wrote it. One of my most prized possessions is a scrapbook my mother kept of letters my father wrote to her in 1941, while working construction on a military base in Newfoundland. Those letters contain

quotations by Tennyson and Shelley, poems he wrote, observations about the nature of man in the midst of WWII, admonitions to my brothers to mind their mother and not be scared about air raid drills and blackouts, descriptions of the Aurora Borealis, celebrating Thanksgiving by taking a bunch of "Newfie" kids for ice cream, laments about loneliness and longing for my mother, and the need for her to control spending so they can save money for a down payment on a house.

\$.05, \$200, \$50

"Give Gil and Mal (my oldest brothers) a nickel each for me," he wrote in one of those letters. In another, he suggested that while the two hundred dollar coat my mother wanted to buy was, no doubt, beautiful, perhaps she could make do with a fifty dollar coat.

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In those days before the Internet, my father was my personal worldwide web. Once while working as a reporter, I was doing a story about massive construction cables at Hoover Dam outside of Las Vegas. I wanted to give some context for how much weight they could bear, so, I called my father to ask him how many elephants equaled the tonnage I needed to explain. "Do you want the weight in Indian or African elephants?" he asked "Whatever," I replied impatiently. "Well, think about it. It makes a difference. Let me know in a minute. I'm on the phone with your brother. His trial is on recess and he needs to discuss a point of law." (For the record, an adult male African elephant weight about six tons, an adult male Indian elephant, about five and a half tons.)

Dad once observed that if he could have stayed in school, he would have liked to have become either a writer or a lawyer, but that knowing he had produced a daughter who wrote and two sons who were lawyers he felt satisfied he had achieved both goals.

That said, my father led a hard life and suffered many personal disappointments and, in his last years, terrible health problems.

Once when I faced a significant professional setback, I was lamenting the unfairness of it all—this while my father was in a hospital bed after a massive heart attack. "You'll try again," he said. I looked up shocked. "Galatzees don't quit," he said. It was my last conversation with my father. He died the next morning.

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That's the number of years my parents were married. It was a tempestuous relationship. He moved fast. She was cautious. He was a "regular Joe" without one ounce of pretense. My mother was regal. She could wear an inexpensive polyester dress and look like she had stepped out of a fashion magazine. He ate onions raw, like they were apples. She had a fondness for caviar. They fought a lot, mostly about money.

They argued, but they also agreed on many things: children came first, *West Side Story* was their favorite Broadway musical; music and books needed to be plentiful; and having company over for dinner was a must.

And besides writing poetry, my cigar-chomping father always bought his "Dottie" corsages to wear on special occasions.

In the hospital, his last words to her were: "You are always kind to me."

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My father died at seventy-two. "How did he die?" asked a bewildered good friend, somehow not knowing of the heart attacks, the blindness, and the leg problems. My father was an electrician by profession, gambler at heart, and also one hell of an actor. He lied equally well about his whereabouts (when unaccounted hours

were spent in casinos instead of on the job) and he lied about his failing eyesight, his chest pains, and the agony of the veins in his legs closing and causing nightly, howlingly painful cramps and spasms.

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The only time I ever heard my father say anything resembling self-pity was one night watching the news on TV. The story was about the funeral of a very famous person. The commentator observed that the chapel was filled and that the crowd of mourners had overflowed into the street. My father said that he imagined only ten or so people would come to his funeral. He was wrong. I lost count of the number of people who came up and told me how my father had helped them, saved his life, and was like a father to them. I did, however, count the number of people who signed the condolence book: 137.

100%

A few days after the services, my mother was in the garage folding laundry. She was still in a daze, moving through the task she had done countless times before without thought. As she folded my father's undershirts and socks, all I could think about was that this was the last time she would ever do laundry for my father. It was such a painful idea that to this day, the act of doing laundry is a true affirmation of life for me. But at that moment, I knew one thing for sure. There was my mother, moving forward, not complaining, doing what had to be done. Those were actions I knew my mathematical father would approve of—100%.

¹ Quotation from "But They Were Good to Their People", American Jewish Historical Society

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