

## **Grammy's Secret**

by Andrew Yim

I am three years old in the photo, taken at the end of the Easter weekend, just before Grammy heads back home from New York suburbia to the outskirts of Boston. It is a slap dash portrait—brothers with hair tossed by wind and play, Mom and Dad weary with the holiday effort, framed by the backyard forsythia and violet in first bloom. I stand at Grammy's side with tears running down my cheeks, distraught and aggrieved that she is leaving. My maternal grandmother was the only grandparent I knew, and I adored her.

I knew my Korean grandparents as black and white photos on the living room wall. Their photos held court like austere religious icons, both blessing and reminder of another place and seemingly another time. Grandma Yim was only a distant voice on late night phone calls from Korea. Though she often made the case for relocation to the United States, Dad argued that, without her church community and friends, she'd be lonely and unhappy. So she stayed in Pusan, South Korea, and we never met. Grandfather Yim died just a few years after my birth. Mom's father, Grandfather Donovan, died just before she graduated from college.

Which left only Grammy, and she was fun. With a half-smoked Parliament in hand, a Buick with soft leather seats, and a seemingly insatiable love of card games (Uno, cribbage, hearts, and Russian bank), she was, for a grandchild, easy company. She was a connoisseur of simple pleasures: a buttered roll for the grilled hot dog; large, soft pillows on crisp cotton linen; and long summer evenings on her enclosed porch with endless games. She seduced my three brothers and I with these pleasures, reveling in her role as the indulgent grandparent.

In late summer, my three brothers and I visited her for a week. Located in the toney Boston suburb of Belmont, her house was elegant and sumptuous. What remained of the family's fortune after the Weisbrod brewery, a prosperous Philadelphia establishment, went bankrupt with prohibition, paid for construction of the Pennsylvania Dutch style house. Her father, a first-generation émigré from a farm in northern Germany, threw silver dollars into the crowd of the Mummer's Day parade to mark the loss of his business, driven by despair to near madness. My great-grandfather eventually moved the family north, to Boston, where Grammy met her husband, a third generation Irish American from South Boston, during her first year at Wellesley College.

The house was a museum to Weisbrod's brewery. The stairway wall to the basement was lined with black and white hunting photos of my great-grandfather at a lodge in the Poconos, sitting with his entourage in front of a half dozen deer hanging from hooks, waiting for the butcher's knife. He was a rotund brewer with a handlebar moustache. Posters, platters and other tchotchke with the Weisbrod name and brand decorated the walls and shelves of the parlor. Ornate, Bavarian style steins and porcelain figures from German fairy tales filled in the empty spaces. Half of the basement had been converted into a parlor, part bar, part poker room, and part tribute to her German heritage. My favorite element was the music box below a mounted deer head. Just a bit larger than 2 x 1 feet, the 19<sup>th</sup> century antique featured bells with bees and butterflies as hammers, nymphs and sybils with trumpet, flute and lyre next to the list of songs on the inner lid, and a shiny steel cylinder with hundreds of small needles. From the distance of decades, I hear the cascades of tinny notes and then click of metal on drum and bell.

Some nights during our summer visits, Grammy pulled the cloth and leaf off the two, green felt, Atlantic City style poker tables in the basement for penny poker—five card draw and seven card stud (dealer calls the game). She had a naughty pack of playing cards with illustrations of 1950s cover girls in see through raincoats and skimpy lingerie. “You wouldn't be men if you didn't like 'em,” she said as Cousin Johnny and I giggled. Under her tutelage, I learned to ante up, hold a poker face, and bluff with a pair of twos.

She was a hostess extraordinaire. Happy hour started in the basement parlor with whiskey sours and gin and tonics for the adults and RC cola for the kids. The music box melodies were background to Grammy's raucous, infectious laughter, a strong, clear, crescendo of an alto. We opened the wooden bench next to the bar, pulled out the toys, and melted into the chaos of play, oblivious to the adults and their boring banter. Then we went upstairs to the dining room, which featured a crystal chandelier and mahogany table with ornate, carved, Romanesque decorations. A table made for feasts. Though robbers hit the house twice over the years, the dining room cabinets were still full of silver and porcelain with 19<sup>th</sup> century motifs and designs.

Most of life took place in the kitchen rather than in the basement. The kitchen table was where Mom and Grammy chatted through breakfast coffee, English muffins and eggs sunny side up. My brothers and I lunched on chips and sandwiches between ping pong and swims in her neighbor's in-ground pool. Some days Grammy would settle into the kitchen with a romance novel and cigarettes, whiling away the long New England summer afternoons to the sounds of grandchildren in play and then the Westminster chimes of the grandfather clock.

\*

From the distance of decades, I see her joy in grandparenting within the trajectory of her life; mother, then widow just as my mother and uncle left for college, careers, and parenthood. She went to church, more habit than devotion, and had a small but steady circle of friends for cards, drinks, and nights at the Boston pops. Jessie, her housekeeper and confidante, came once a week to clean and chat. But other than those occasions and her grandchildren's visits, her life was spent more in solitude than company. As a child, I never thought about Grammy beyond the cards and laughter, trips to the movies and ball games, Howard Johnson hot dog lunches, and hot fudge sundaes at Bailey's Ice Cream Parlor.

As far as I knew, she read mostly romance novels and the occasional best seller. Her library consisted of three shelves along the reading room wall with a modest collection of best sellers and the occasional classic. In boredom, some afternoons I'd browse the books, looking for something even plausibly interesting, an Encyclopedia Brown mystery or Peanuts comic. There was an odd title in the collection that didn't seem to make sense. *Mein Kampf*. It seemed an odd work, a glorified pamphlet of no interest. I didn't even think to open it. It was just, well, weird. *Mein Kampf*. What the hell was that? There were no illustrations, symbols or designs on the cover. Just two words in a spindly, no-nonsense font. To the eight-year-old, it looked like a dull adult book. Later, in adolescence, I looked at the book, now aware of its origins, and thought that perhaps it was read and kept as a sort of historical artifact. I never asked Grammy for an explanation. I was oblivious to any connection between the book, the consequence of its words, and Grammy's life.

Grammy was a Reagan Republican, perhaps a Goldwater one too. By the age of ten I was already a committed Democrat, and so we argued about welfare moms birthing babies to increase the dole and other hot-button issues. She was racist to the extent that mainstream conservative politics of the time had racist undertones. But she was interested in the world beyond affluent Belmont, with an appreciation for the subtleties of foreign cultures and intricacies of cross-cultural communication. She participated in a Boston-wide program that matched university students from abroad with Boston families. Hosting them for holidays and the occasional weekend dinner, she welcomed them like family and so they became. Loubob, a Lebanese student at Wellesley, Polivius, a Syrian engineering student at MIT and Jenny Koo, a Korean violinist at the Boston Conservatory, were household names, often remembered in fond reminiscence. Polivius became a life-long friend of my uncle, with joint family ski trips and eventually a funeral eulogy. Grammy gave them the love and comfort of a second home, happy hours before Thanksgiving dinners, card games on late summer nights, a safe harbor in a foreign land.

When Granny passed, contrary to her buoyant personality, her funeral was a modest affair, held at the local Lutheran church and attended by close family and friends. My cousins gave the readings and I played “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desire” on the trumpet. It was a grey, January day, just beyond the last gasp of the holiday season. We gathered in her basement parlor after the ceremony, surrounded by beer steins and platters with the Weisbrod Brewery name, at the tables where we once played penny poker. I remember turning the crank of the music box to cue the tinny, 19<sup>th</sup> Century marches and ditties. We remembered, with much laughter, our time with her. She had done her best, as grandmother and friend, and went to her rest, it seemed, without regret.

Several weeks after her funeral in 1990, my mother and uncle returned to the house on Juniper Road to clean, sort, and then divvy up the estate. In the attic, Mom found a box with an ornate swastika flag and other paraphernalia. I found it bizarre to learn about a swastika flag in a house that contained so many dear memories. While *Mein Kampf* was a curiosity, a swastika flag seemed less ambiguous, more graphic representation of the horrific past. But Mom laughed when she told us about discovery of the flag that had seemingly almost jumped out of the box in the attic. The laughter seemed like resolution, even absolution, as if a symbol of genocide and Holocaust was a quirky souvenir or eccentricity. But I wasn’t ready to let Grammy off the hook. A serious and sensitive young man, I’d just read Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz* at college. I pressed Mom for an explanation. “Oh Andrew, it was just a thing before the war. Lots of German-Americans were hanging the flag over their doors. It didn’t mean anything, really. How could they have known?” We never talked of it again.

The German American Bund movement, founded in 1936, initially consisted mostly of German Americans whose cultural pride grew and grew until it latched onto Hitler’s toxic, genocidal brew of German nationalism and antisemitism. The movement swelled quickly into the tens of thousands, culminating in a Madison Square Garden rally in 1939, a “pro American” rally which really was a promotion of Hitler and Nazi Fascism. Black and white photos in an article in *The Atlantic* show earnest Americans in crowds as if at a Fourth of July parade, just before watermelon and fireworks. But swastikas

and iron crosses took the place of stars and stripes. Instead of right hands on hearts pledging allegiance, their hands extended upward, straight as arrows, to the fingertips. Did Grammy wear one of the pseudo-military uniforms? Was she all in with a swastika arm band and martial cut of cloth? Certainly, her deep family ties with Germany might have drawn her to the Nazi movement.

Had Grammy been caught up in the fever of the fascist backlash against New Deal politics, an understandable revolt against the progressive movement that banned alcohol and destroyed her father? Or did she feel a deep solidarity with the impoverished, humiliated German people? Was she just an impressionable housewife flirting with extremist politics? Or was she a true believer, in full embrace with the Nazi ideology and its thirst for purity, supremacy, and fascist domination? A deep dive into [ancestry.com](https://ancestry.com) reveals that Grammy traveled with her mother to spend the summers of 1925, 1930, and 1931 in Germany, presumably with family. What conversations did she hear on the streets and in the kitchens as an impressionable teen in the Weimar Republic? Did she feel or understand the wounded pride, the humiliation, and poverty of the Germans in wake of the Treaty of Versailles? Did she return home with a copy of *Mein Kampf* and swastika flag? The flag and other paraphernalia couldn't have been her father's, as he died in 1919. She never mentioned those trips to me, and so they are guarded in secrecy. Grammy didn't speak of her childhood.

\*

How odd, then, it must have been, in 1961, to meet her future son in law, a gaunt Korean just a few years removed from war and dislocation. In a dog-eared photo, Dad stands with an axe next to a woodpile, dressed like a New England farmer, taking a break from studies at Dartmouth College. He moved quickly from a rice farm in what is now North Korea to the Ivy league via service as a military translator during the Korean War. On the next page of the family album, the bride and bridesmaids pose in white, satiny dresses with Jackie O haircuts, while the men stand gallantly in tails and tuxedos with hair waxed and neatly parted. It is a fine Boston wedding, Dartmouth groom weds

Wellesley bride. The groom, though, seems an anomaly; Asian but well-integrated with a PhD in political science and tenure track appointment.

Another photo, in muted colors of the 1970s, shows us at the Thanksgiving table. Dad stands at the head of the table with carving knife and turkey, surrounded by his White sons with Eurasian eyes and cheeks. I remember the moments before and after holiday dinners. Dad pours Grammy one of his signature whiskey sours as he talks about faculty politics, and then shares an after-dinner cigarette with her in solidarity against Mom's protests. Their relationship never seemed difficult to my child's eyes until, in adolescence, I was angered by a comment she made while discussing Reagan era politics. I don't remember the specific content of the comment but remember clear as day my own response: "Well, I'm a mutt of all nations," I yelled and then stormed off to my bedroom. Dad followed me and asked me to return and make peace with Grammy. "Just ignore her," he said. "I've had to tolerate decades of that nonsense. I get tired of trying too. She has a way of making me feel the foreigner." I returned to the dining room. Grammy stood and hugged me and told me she loved me. The scent of cigarettes on her breath was intoxicating.

In the end, the question still stands. Was Grammy really a Nazi sympathizer, or even member of the Bund? Or did she, as my Mom defended, just hang the flag in solidarity, as if a clover on St Patrick's day? The evidence against her is circumstantial but I find it persuasive. To me at least she displayed no overt, virulent antisemitism. Yet still she kept *Mein Kampf* on the bookshelf and the swastika flag and paraphernalia in the attic, as if she still harbored a lingering sympathy towards the Nazi movement and ambivalence towards the Holocaust.

\*

In adulthood, I discovered that my mother's politics veered beyond stereotype, into conspiracy and even antisemitism. Like the small book in the library and the flag hidden in the attic, Mom's views were for familial consumption only. When the subject of the

Holocaust or World War II comes up, Mom argues that the Holocaust wasn't specifically an antisemitic event. Gypsies, homosexuals, and even Catholics were sent to the camps. Israel and its supporters, she insists, have appropriated the event to advance their political agenda. Yet she worked for many years as a physical therapist at a nursing home managed and populated by orthodox Jews in Monsey NY, a mostly Hassidic town. One of her favorite patients, Mrs. Horowitz, was a Holocaust survivor. I remember the tattooed numbers on Mrs. Horowitz's forearm when I visited Mom at work. How to explain the paradox of my mother? A woman who broke racial barriers with marriage to a Korean harbors prejudice against a people she served and befriended.

Like Grammy, Mom had strong attachments to her German heritage. She sent care packages to cousins in Germany after the war and went with Omama (her grandmother) to visit family the summer before her first year at Wellesley College. In contrast, she rarely mentions her Irish grandparents. During her visit to Germany, she bonded with Günter, a third cousin close to her in age, and so began a life-long friendship, with transatlantic visits and attempts to pass the relationship to the next generation. "Don't forget," she'd counter during our arguments, "how badly the allies bombed Germany. That was a war crime too."

I analyze the paradox. Her effort to downplay, even deny, the Holocaust seems at once a defense of family, her grandmother, mother, and relatives from Cologne and Karlsruhe who still send Christmas cards, and some sort of old grudge. Is it prejudice, bad politics, or a sense that swift judgement of Nazi Germany implies judgement of family as well? I don't think I'll ever untie this gordian knot of politics, family, loyalty, and life experience.

\*

Mom's annoying comments and justifications mostly stopped with the appearance of my wife Lina. Her Soviet passport had "Jewish" printed on the line for identification of

ethnicity. Lina came to the United States in 1992 as a religious refugee. Her Great Aunt Vera arrived a year later. Aunt Vera was a survivor of the “Holocaust by bullets” in Ukraine when Nazi “mobile units” roamed from village to village, gathering Jews and then shooting them en masse. Aunt Vera’s protector, a Ukrainian who hid her when the Nazis searched the village of Shatura, is listed among the righteous on the Wall of Honor in Jerusalem. Lina is family now, and with family, it seems, other rules apply. Mom cares enough to keep her comments on Jews and Israel to herself.

The antisemitism winds paradoxically through my family like a stubborn vine in the backyard garden, a creeper or holly that takes deep root, flaring and then receding with seasons and weeding. After a point, you hardly realize it’s there. It’s part of the landscape. But when is the time to confront the vine, pull it all out to the root? How to draw the lines in the craggy landscape and so spare judgement of my own? Can I distinguish between casual, off-hand, or conspiratorial antisemitism and hard-core Nazi, master race, Aryan zealotry as if movies, one PG-13 and the other XXX? Where is the line between bad politics and prejudice? If I forgive, justify, or simply turn a blind eye, am I complicit?

Over time, now decades, the presence of *Mein Kampf* and the swastika flag among Grammy’s things seem an odd footnote to an otherwise decent life devoted to her family and friends. The Easter photo in the backyard garden as I cry next to Grammy, the happy hours in the parlor, trips to Fenway Park, and smell of Buick leather occupy much more of my memory of Grammy than those profane souvenirs. But, in the wake of January 6, 2021, when a mob propelled by neofascist slogans rushed the capitol like a medieval horde caught in bloodlust, I am left to wonder just how far did Grammy’s antisemitism lead her astray? Did she march to Madison Square Garden in Nazi regalia? Did she struggle to reconcile love of her German family and their culture with the Holocaust and horrors of World War II? Why did she leave *Mein Kampf* on the bookshelf? I ask the questions as if clear answer would allow me to love her again as I did in childhood, without reservation or qualification.



**Andrew Yim** traveled and worked in the republics of the former Soviet Union in the mid-1990s before graduate school and then a career as a primary care nurse practitioner in the community health clinics of south-central Connecticut. He writes before the commute. His essays have appeared in *The New Haven Review*, *Trailer Runner Magazine*, the “Modern Love” column of the *New York Times*, and *Hektoen International: A Journal of Medical Humanities*.