From Where I Came: How Digital Narratives About Place Can Illuminate Everything

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Recommended Citation
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From Where I Came: How Digital Narratives About Place Can Illuminate Everything

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Back Story

Twelve years ago I read Everything is Illuminated by Jonathan Safran Foer. It is the account of one man’s experience in his destroyed ancestral homeland. The homeland is a village called Trochenbrod (Trachimbrod in the book) in what is now western Ukraine. Reading this book about visiting one’s ancestral country and village fascinated me, especially, since my dad’s family came from a similar area in Lithuania. I remember my dad telling me that the film set of Fiddler on the Roof looked just like his village where he grew up. When my dad passed away in 1995, my mother gave me all his legal papers including a passport, birth certificate and my grandparents’ wedding certificate. The village listed on all documents was Malot. This launched my search for trying to find Malot on a map. I had a yearning to visit this place, because, for me, it would be magical in some way.

Through many Internet searches, I learned the village called Malot had a name change. It was now Moletai. My dad told me Malot was in Russia, however, it was actually in Lithuania. He thought it was in Russia because Lithuania was ruled by Russia and people around him spoke Russian. So now, I had the place on a map. Then the pieces came together even more. I was invited to speak at a conference in Vilnius, Lithuania, about 40 south of my dad’s birthplace. I planned my journey to see this village finally, not knowing if anything still resembled the place as it was in 1917--when my dad left.

Upon returning to the United States, I was so moved by my visit to Moletai that I could not stop talking about it. I, therefore, created a website, (http://from-whereicame.wordpress.com) and posted my account of the journey. Here begins the project called the Heritage Project.

Before I show you the website posting, I want you to see a model of the original town center that was destroyed by Germany during WWII. The town center has been rebuilt to resemble the original buildings. The second picture shows my family (husband and daughter) in front of a building in the new replicated town center.
Figure 1. A model of the town as it was before WWII.

Figure 2. Hunt’s husband and daughter in front of the Moletai town center.
Here is my story posted on the website:

For the first 60 years of my life, I believed that I had Russian heritage. That’s what my dad told me. He had always said that his family left Russia to escape persecution. After he died, I came across his passport and learned that he was actually born in Molat, which isn’t actually in Russia. It’s in Lithuania. Upon this realization I was a little disappointed, as I loved Tolstoy, vodka, Doctor Zhivago, and beautiful coats. I didn’t know what Lithuania was famous for — I didn’t even know where exactly it was.

Once I started exploring it, I was intrigued with the romance of Lithuania, a country taken over by the Russians (while my dad lived there), Poles, Germans, and Soviets. Lithuanians finally achieved national freedom in the 1990s. I had read the book, Everything is Illuminated, and wanted to go see the place of my family’s heritage. The first synagogue was built in 1728. In the 1700s, Jews were invited to Lithuania.
to help bring prosperity to the country. I do not know how many generations back my family lived in Molat. It is one of those questions I wished I had asked.

I learned that there were 2397 inhabitants in Molat in 1897, the time my grandparents and great grandparents lived there, and eighty percent (80%) of them were Jews. Now, the Jewish population in the renamed village, Moletai is 10 to 100. Currently, residents are not required to give their religion in the census; therefore it is difficult to know the actual Jewish population. When my dad, born in 1911, lived there, Jews and Lithuanians lived side by side, until the Jews were bullied and killed. Later, those that stayed would be murdered due to Nazi influence. My family left in 1917 to save their own lives.

Figure 4. A restored trade house. Moletai, Lithuania.

When we arrived in Moletai, to our surprise and delight, we saw original, small, wood houses still standing and occupied by current residents. The double doors, shown in the picture, are more typical of Jewish homes. Some houses had traces of holes, with layers of paint over them, on the right side of the doorpost where a mezuzah (a scroll
with verses of the Old Testament) may have hung at one time. While we were there, the open market was going strong. There were colorful mums (chrysanthemums) for sale. A big cardboard box, on display, was filled with sunflower seeds and visited by birds, swooning down to gather their lunch. There were challahs and dark rye breads. There were more cardboard boxes filled with onions and potatoes. Women in their 70s and 80s were selling goods. Walking up and down the streets, I wondered where my dad had lived. Was his house still standing? Where was my grandfather’s blacksmith business? My dad told me that his village looked like the village portrayed in the film, Fiddler on the Roof. Seeing old photos, in the Moletai museum, of the village in the early 1900s, confirmed that it surely did.

Exploring further, I was surprised to find that the Jewish cemetery was still there, located on a hill, overlooking the village, in it maybe 100 tombstones still stood. The stones that were legible were engraved in Hebrew. Many had a Jewish star at the top. Each stone was made of pink or black granite. There is a movement in Eastern Europe to restore Jewish cemeteries.

The Russians and Nazis destroyed many Jewish cemeteries. The Soviets used the tombstones for bricks to build structures. Many cemeteries that remain do not have the Jewish population present to maintain them. Yet, in Moletai, our guide, Simon believed that this cemetery had been restored because the stones were standing erect and the grass had been somewhat cleared. I had brought 30 polished colored rocks

Figure 4. Jewish cemetery in the town of Moletai.

The Russians and Nazis destroyed many Jewish cemeteries. The Soviets used the tombstones for bricks to build structures. Many cemeteries that remain do not have the Jewish population present to maintain them. Yet, in Moletai, our guide, Simon believed that this cemetery had been restored because the stones were standing erect and the grass had been somewhat cleared. I had brought 30 polished colored rocks
to place on the stones, a Jewish tradition marking one’s visit. However, in my excitement to visit my father’s birthplace, I left the rocks in my suitcase lying on the floor back at the Congress Hotel.

While in Lithuania, I discovered that the foods I love and bring memories of family and Jewish culture were actually Lithuanian foods: boiled potatoes that were then baked in oil (now I have the recipe), kasha, a type of potato pancakes (they actually served us kasha pancakes, delightful), smoked fish, dark rye bread, sunflower seeds, borscht, poppy seeds, farmer’s cheese, and Smetana, a type of sour cream. Borscht served with hardboiled eggs and Smetana, hot or cold. All this reminds me of meals with my dad and the joy of reminiscing the heritage he gave me.

The Moletai countryside is beautiful. My family came from a place of rolling hills, dense, tall forests with birch trees, and many lakes. It is now called “the Land of Lakes.” Lots of rain in the fall. Is this why I love to walk in rain? Why I sit out on the porch while it is raining? Winters are harsh with cold temperatures and deep snow. I never thought about my dad as a child living in such severe weather. Now, I do. As a child, I dreamed of living in the North Country, somewhere beautiful such as my current home in Montana. My small town in Montana reminds me of Moletai.

As our guide and driver drove us back to the hotel in Vilnius, I sat in silence thinking about my family’s life there. I thought about how my grandmother learned to bake all my favorite goodies in this town. When I was a child, my dad would stop by her apartment every Friday. He brought home her baked challah, cookies with colored candies on top, and kamish bread. I learned that crocheted linens were popular in Lithuania, and it was there my grandmother learned to make all those crocheted handkerchiefs she gave me. I always loved my grandmother. Being in the town, where she was born and grew up, really solidified my heritage. Hopefully, it was a week that my own daughter will reminisce about in the future with her children showing them photos of where her grandfather and great grandparents were born. The lesson is to reminisce now with family. There are so many questions I have and no one has the answers. I do have an answer to why I have Marc Chagall’s painting, Fiddler, in my home.
Background Research

The publication of Robert Butler’s seminal article in 1963 regarding life review processes launched a desire to understand and elucidate the role of memories in the lives of older adults. [3] Narrative approaches to understanding the human condition are gaining advocates in the social sciences, mental health, and gerontology. Reminiscence is part of this narrative approach and is defined here as: the recall of personally experienced episodes from one’s past. Parker [4] proposed promoting a better understanding of reminiscence processes through a framework that included continuity throughout one’s life. Missing history in one’s life may diminish one’s self-identity. Having continuity with one’s ancestral history and experiencing a culture through place may help to strengthen identity. Reminiscence, here, is viewed as cognitive activities across the lifespan of self and ancestors, where the proposed project may enhance the mental and emotional health of others. Currently, reminiscence is investigated and/or applied by several disciplines, including occupational therapy, nursing, recreational therapy, social work, education, theology, gerontology, and several divisions of psychology (e.g., developmental, cognitive, personality), to name only a few. [5] Those reading the website postings may also find mental and emotional health by learning about from where their ancestors came, even though they are not able to travel there themselves.

The development of this website may be helpful in establishing reminiscing groups. It appears that group reminiscence leads to a greater frequency and enjoyment of reminiscing and an interest in continuing further peer group activity. [6] The website may be beneficial to share in group therapy and launch insightful conversations about culture. This has merit for exploration by students for group activities serving older adults in Pacific University’s Gerontology and Occupational Therapy programs.

Methods

Equipment

Equipment included the iPad. The iPad also provides a camera, which helped take pictures of interviewees’. Apps were downloaded for recording interviews and other media. [7] Photoshop was used for editing pictures of people, places, and artifacts.
**Process**

Occupational therapy students sought out ethnic minorities to be interviewed or requested that individuals write their story for submission. Occupational therapy students distributed surveys via e-mail or in person to willing participants within two weeks of interviews or written submissions to the From Where I Came website. IRB was not sought. Agreeing to complete the survey sufficed for participant approval. Four surveys were distributed and all six participants returned each of the surveys with every question answered. Each survey consisted of six questions on a five-point Likert scale that highlighted topics of social connectedness, cultural discovery, and personal identity related to each participant’s experience of submitting their story or being an interviewee. Three open-ended questions were included at the end of the survey to capture participant thoughts and suggestions intended for further research.

**Results**

Six individuals posted their story of going back to an ancestral place. Two were interviewed by the students, who then transcribed the interviews and posted them on the website, with photos provided. The other interviews were turned into stories, as readers seemed to prefer this format better. The quantitative data results showed that sharing an ancestral story was an 87.5% positive experience for the four participants as 21/24 questions were marked “agree” or “highly agree” (see Table 1). Among the responses received from the three open-ended questions, individuals wrote:

1. Question regarding sharing a visit to their ancestral home:

   “It made me really think about the thread of where I came from and how that impacts who I am today.”

   “Makes me more grateful for my ancestors and want to learn more about them and I appreciate them.”

   “Understanding one’s roots helps one understand one self.”

   “I realized it was nice being able to say out loud what I think and feel about my family, heritage, and just overall culture.”

2. Question regarding participating in this project:
“...Has also made me realize that I want to know more about my family’s experiences growing up and persevering in communism.”

3. Question regarding the interviewing process:

“Maybe have topics ready such as food, transportation, family, landscape, etc. ready because it helps spark observations one had or reflections that don’t necessarily come up with an open ended question.”

“I think having interview questions that were answered and then put in a summary would make more sense than the tedious task of writing out every word that I said during the interview.”

**Conclusion**

In a time when technology is deeply integrated in society, the Internet age may lead to depersonalization, if life stories are not shared. From Where I Came was created to allow people to share experiences of heritage, traditions, and culture, through the medium of a virtual environment. Those reading the website postings may find mental and emotional health by learning about from where their ancestors came, even though they are not able to travel there themselves.

Telling and retelling of significant events often times occurs through the context of social interactions. Sharing self-narratives with peer groups, family, and friends influences one’s identity and provides meaning to one’s life. Children who know their heritage have a stronger sense of control and an increased self-esteem. [8]

The Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process (OTPF) [9] provides a summary of occupational therapy practice guidelines describing the profession. Specifically, it relates to practitioners, students, educators, researchers, payers, and consumers. Included in the OTPF are domains related to cultural, social, and virtual environments. Leisure participation, leisure exploration, and social participation also contribute to the goal of promoting occupational health and wellbeing and are outlined in the OTPF.

While all individuals may submit stories, this website encourages ethnic minorities to post, as these groups may have fewer opportunities for finding others who relate to their story. Future research will examine how various ethnic groups relate stories; how much information is disclosed; and identify common themes.
Table 1: Survey Results from post-interview/submissions for “From Where I Came” Project (results posted April 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Highly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Highly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I enjoyed sharing my personal experiences with people.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy hearing about other people’s personal experiences related their heritage and/or ancestry.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the past I have had the chance to talk to family members, friends, or acquaintances about my ‘ancestral home.’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting my ‘ancestral home’ made me think deeper about my own identity.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting the chance to read other people’s stories of visiting their ancestral home is of interest to me.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing this interview has encouraged me to find out more about my own cultural heritage.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes


