

PREFACE

Covering the length of a wall in my hallway is a parade of photographs, portraits, and other pictures of the members of my family, from ancestors long dead, to grandchildren growing up.

I find myself walking down this hallway often, examining the faces long gone, remembering them and all they contributed to my upbringing and understanding. At the top, along ancestor row, are old sepia prints from Russia, one showing my mother's family, the Perlmans, Aunt Bernice not yet born, my grandmother and grandfather sitting straight, my mother, Jeannette, her long hair pulled back with a giant bow, young Uncle George standing behind her, baby Uncle Sammy between his mother and father. In another portrait, of my father's family, the Allens, my father, Samuel Allen, stands behind his seated father who is wearing a bowler hat, his mother holding younger brother Uncle Hy, older brother Uncle Ben seated in her lap. Next in line, an old photo of Grandma Bessie, my father's mother. Then, a portrait of Aunt Sara, my father's only sister, young and smiling as she was then. Aunt Sara is alive today, in her late 90's, still vibrant and in touch.

A PICTUREBOOK ON THE WALL: MEMOIR

Below them on the wall are Uncle George and his violin, another portrait of my mother and Uncle George as children, my mother a little girl about six years old with long hair flowing down her back, wearing an old-fashioned white dress. Uncle George in Russian clothes, holding her hand, not more than eight, standing as straight as he always stood, even after he reached the age of one hundred.

A photo of the three siblings, my mother, Aunt Bernice and Uncle George, when they were much older. Uncle Sammy, their younger brother, was long dead by then. I think the only portrait of Sammy in existence sits beside his brother and sisters, a small thin likeness, the same Sammy with his mustache and crooked grin. A golden portrait of Aunt Bernice after she won a beauty contest hangs above a photo of her husband Saul, with his smart-alecky grin.

I lived in the same Chicago apartment with my family and my mother's family when I was small and circumstances forced us together. My mother's mother is not on the wall except in the antique portrait from Russia. Somehow she never sat still long enough to be captured.

Her husband, the grandfather I never knew, sits nearby in his wagon, his horse tethered in front, ready to start on his rounds, selling toys, tobacco and anything else he could peddle. A tall, handsome man, with an obvious resemblance to his oldest son George, he sits erect in his wagon, dark hair tousled, the picture of confidence and good will.

Next to him, a portrait of my father when he was about seven, seated on a chair, legs crossed at the ankles, chin on one hand, his serious expression foretelling his future gravitas.

My brother Marty is there, looking handsome in his Army uniform. Poor Marty. Life dealt him a series of unsurvivable blows, one of which was having a sister like me.

I'm on the wall too, a baby with a pudgy hand on a goldfish bowl, not quite ready to grab the fish inside. In another portrait I'm a child of about five, my straight hair framing a face with an

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uncharacteristically angelic expression. I have another photo, in a book somewhere, of me, gawky at eight, hair fastened with a hairbow almost as big as my head, its jaunty angles resembling wings about to carry me away. And, maybe, eventually, they did.

Many other photos and portraits hang on the wall, of family members still living. But the faces from the past are gone, except for their presence on my wall and in my memory.