

My Father's Briefcase by Lucie Miłosz Haskins

My father keeps his leather briefcase hidden away in his bottom dresser drawer. All the years I lived at home, I never saw it more than a few times. I remember it as an absolutely beautiful case, crafted with old-fashioned skill and caring. Golden in color, it tantalized the nose with rich smells of well-cured leather. Elegantly detailed, but rather flat, it sported two strong flaps and buckles over poufy pouches. Many secrets could fit inside its inner zippered compartments. I only had the nerve once to open that bottom drawer, in a furtive moment, to reassure myself that the briefcase both existed and was safe.

The briefcase was one of the few things my father was able to bring to America from our temporary home in postwar France. I think he loved it especially for that reason. (He and my mother, Polish workers freed from a German labor camp, had migrated ever westward and patiently bided their time in Valenciennes, adding to their family, while waiting for that magic ticket to the United States.)

On special occasions, usually when my father was feeling melancholy, he would get out the briefcase, set it down on the dining room table, settle comfortably before it, and carefully examine the papers within. At first, these scraps of paper were nothing special to me. That's probably why my father protected them so fiercely and made it very clear to us three girls that we were not allowed near them.

But, as I grew older and lived through my own trials of assimilating into a new culture, I gained an appreciation for what my parents had been through and what those papers truly represented. Gradually, if I

wasn't too obtrusive, my father started tolerating my presence during his journey into the past. I would use those times to try to retrieve more secrets from my parents' unspoken history.

What clues did that briefcase hold? I captured a glimpse of some of our original passports. Was my father's first passport from Poland also in there - overstamped, as he claimed, with the dreaded *Bastard* designation? Did the briefcase contain my parents' original marriage certificate issued in a civil ceremony in Germany after the war ended? Was the second marriage certificate in there also? (It was required when the Church refused to recognize the civil ceremony.)

When my father considered me old enough, he showed me my birth certificate. It was very ordinary-looking and yellowed with age. I remember carefully unfolding the creases and trying to read the handwritten cursive script. I couldn't, since it wasn't in Polish or English (my only languages). My father translated the words for me: *fille* - daughter, *nee* - born. I picked out Lucie and Milosz and Valenciennes. My birthdate - *quatorze Mars* - was more difficult, since it was spelled out; my father showed me where it was written.

When I was twelve years old, our family became naturalized citizens. Those precious new documents quickly took up permanent residence in my father's briefcase. Soon after, my parents used their accumulated savings to make a down payment on our first home. Those important mortgage papers also went into my father's briefcase.

After I married and just before I moved overseas as an Army wife, I went to my father for my birth certificate and my naturalization papers (essential to obtain my own passport). With grave ceremony, my father handed the papers to me and said, "*I think you keep it now.*"

Instantly, I felt an unworthy recipient. Here these precious pieces of my life had rested in a secure and an important place for over nineteen years. Who was I to uproot them?

Because I was headed for Europe, my father began reminiscing and went through the papers in his briefcase. As always, he handled each paper lovingly. We looked at the German *Arbeitskarten* (reminders of the difficult war years), his French driver's license photo of a handsome young man with a cocky smile, and the passports that provided a passage to the free world. What a world full of meaning and what a lifetime of memories they embodied - some of the memories kindly blurred with the passing of time.

I sit back now and still wonder from a perspective of thirty years, what other precious pieces of our past does that briefcase still contain? What other secrets, what other pieces of family history are still hidden away in that beautiful and mysterious receptacle?

When can I finally look?

