

## My earliest memory

It's 1975 and I'm six years old. My parents dropped me off to spend the night at my grandmother's house, a modest two-bedroom home with a large front porch and dirt floor cellar in Hamtramck, Michigan. Hamtramck was a different world than our suburban city. It was a Little Poland in the heart of Detroit with narrow streets and sidewalks, and a shopping district where my grandmother, who we called Babcia, age 79, walked to the bakery and butcher, saying hello to her Polish neighbors along the way.

That day, I snuck up the attic stairs, something I had never done before. Alone with Babcia in the house and without my older sister, I was free to explore while Babcia was busy in the kitchen preparing dinner.

Climbing the creaky narrow stairs of the mostly unfinished attic, I saw a small open room at the front of the house under the eaves where sunlight streamed in through the window. It was sticky hot. I worked my way over the floor trusses to the little area that held a few boxes and a trunk – the trunk Babcia used when she came to America from Poland in 1914, sixty years earlier.

I opened the heavy lid, hinges creaking. Inside were four bright white pillowcases with some delicate embroidery, a small stack of black and white photographs, and something long and skinny wrapped in tissue paper. I lifted up the little package. It was heavier than I thought it would be. I unfolded the paper and discovered a long braid of dark brown hair. A small ribbon kept the braid together at the bottom.

How strange! Why did she have this stored away in a hidden place? Was it *her* hair? I held it up in front of my face for a closer look. It *must be* her hair!

After wrapping up the braid and placing it back in the trunk, I headed for the stairwell, glad to leave the musty heat behind and savor my discovery.

When I returned to the kitchen, Babcia was there, silently rolling out dough on her kitchen table making kluski (noodles) for the chicken soup we would have for dinner. The pot on the stove was simmering and the smell of the broth sweetened in the air. I saw her kitchen with fresh eyes: the refrigerator with the heavy metal handle and the smallest freezer imaginable that could fit only one square pint box of Vernors ice cream; the Polish language newspapers stacked up on a chair near the doorway; the white cotton curtains in the window overlooking the small backyard where she liked to grow sunflowers. And I saw her: the classic unshapely shape of a Polish grandmother in a light blue, modest floral house dress with a zipper up the front, her stockings rolled down sitting on her swollen ankles, the skin of her upper arms swinging back and forth as she rolled the dough.

Looking back, I realize now how precious this moment is for me. Babcia had a life before she lived alone in this house. She was young once, vibrant and adventurous. She had been places and seen things that shaped her and led her to this destiny. That day in the kitchen, with the eyes of a six-year-old, I saw her as a person, not just my grandmother. She had a life I knew nothing about. She had traveled miles and worked hard to get here, to this moment, with me, in her sun-filled kitchen making chicken-noodle soup.

Babcia saw me standing there in the threshold, smiled at me and went back to cooking. She was always loving and welcoming though she never said much. Stories about her life growing up in Poland were never shared, perhaps because of a sadness or pain, or perhaps because of how she was raised in the Polish way of never complaining.

I continued puttering and adventuring around the house – exploring the dank one-car garage in the back on the alleyway, peeking down the stairwell to the cellar where dozens of glass canning jars were stored, opening the closet in her sewing room to see the different colored threads and fabrics, teasing the parakeet in the sitting room by sticking my hand though the little door to scare him.

Spending the afternoon with Babcia was the same as it had always been and yet it was different. I discovered what it was to see another person, to respect the hiddenness in someone that makes them who they are.

When we went to sleep that evening, as I climbed up into the bed that we shared when I came for a visit, I watched my grandmother with a deeper sense of love and care. I felt a kinship with her that I hadn't recognized before. We lay there, side-by-side, our heads resting on the starched pillowcases.

She held my hand for a moment, her skin so smooth and delicate, and said, "Good night, kochanie." My heart swelled when she called me her little sweetheart. I said, "Good night, Babcia. I love you." I closed my eyes, enjoying the warmth from her body, feeling glad for the day and my discovery.

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