ESSAY

Journey into my Grandmother's Tongue

by Margreet Dietz



"Cutting Through" by Damaris Ruiz Nino

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I called Mom, who was in a hospital recovering from a hip replacement, in Harderwijk, the Dutch town where I grew up. I'd left the Netherlands in my mid-20s and never looked back; these days I lived in Squamish, Canada.

"Please call Oma," Mom said immediately. I could hear Mom crying. Oma was her mother, my grandmother and the woman I was named after.

"What's going on?" Oma was 96. *Was she OK?*

"I can't tell you, just please call Oma."

"Are you OK?"

"Yes, just call Oma."

"I'll call you right back."

I dialled Oma's familiar number expecting the worst. My sister, also living in Canada but visiting the Netherlands, answered. Oma had been found wandering outside the previous night and again very early that morning, both times wearing little more than her nightgown, she said. Oma was unharmed, she said, but could no longer remain in the one-bedroom apartment in which she had lived for the past eight years; while Oma's apartment was part of a seniors' home, with an emergency button in the bedroom and bathroom, it was meant for seniors who only needed part-time assistance. Oma was free to come and go as she pleased. And that was no longer safe.

It was a Saturday evening, and Dad, along with the nurses at the home, was frantically trying to find a closed-care facility where she could be admitted right away. Shocked but also relieved my grandmother had not died, I asked to speak to Oma.

"Ah it's you," Oma greeted me in a familiar way that suggested she knew exactly who I was. But then she began talking in what sounded like Czech. Was it the language of her home country she remained fluent in after all these years, or a made-up language brought on by the dementia? Never before had I regretted my inability to speak or understand Czech as much as I did now.

"Oma, can you speak in Dutch? I don't understand Czech," I said as gently and kindly as possible. She kept talking in what I believed — hoped — was Czech.

"*Nerozumím*," I tried — Czech for 'I don't understand.'

But her mind was stuck in her mother tongue, or something that sounded like it. So I listened. The Czech language had been a part of my life, yet I did not speak or understand it. I knew the odd word, even sentence, and was familiar with its sounds, but otherwise I was

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lost. Oma and Mom occasionally spoke Czech, though only at my grandmother's initiative and always briefly. Dad did not speak the language, and neither did I, nor did my sister. I was always aware of Oma and Mom's Czech heritage, and therefore mine, but did not really understand what that meant. Life during and after the Second World War had been hard for them, just like it had been on people in the Netherlands, the entire world. The Iron Curtain made the previous world of Oma and Mom inaccessible, and their life in Czechoslovakia was rarely discussed. Not that I heard stories about Dad's growing up in the post-war years either — my sister and I just knew times had been tough, and that we should never take for granted the things we had now, from freedom to food on the table.

The sensations of Czech, the sounds, the rolls of the tongue, were all exotic and somehow forbidden, a different world that was part of mine yet also beyond reach. As a child, the Czech language was to me the sound of words like *Kolá?e*, the sweet cakes with cherries or blueberries Oma used to bake, or the tender *Dobrou noc* we would wish Oma before we went to sleep at her house.

I grew up used to Oma's unique amalgamation of languages and accents, her own made-up words and expressions that were mixtures of Czech, German, Dutch, *Drents*, and herself. I grew up with a Dad who would seamlessly switch between *Drents* — the provincial dialect his parents, all his six siblings, and later their children, spoke — and *ABN*, short for *Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands* — literally General Civilized Dutch, the official name for standard Dutch. There are plenty of dialects in the Netherlands, which betray one's regional, and often social, roots. Those who cannot speak "proper" *ABN* can be teased, seen as backward, less intelligent or less prosperous. *Drents* has the connotation of a dialect spoken by farmers often stereotyped as people who are less educated, less modern, not as clued in. Yet for my sister and I, and Mom too, it was our inability to speak that dialect that set us apart from Dad's side of the family. I sensed, rightly or wrongly, social exclusion and a presumption of snootiness — we were too sophisticated to learn our family's language.

These days I was more aware than ever of accents — in English mine was instantly picked up on. "Where are you from?" I was often asked as soon as I opened my mouth, even though I was now more comfortable in English than in my mother tongue. I could not hear the extent of my own accent, but I knew it was there. I could tell it was thicker after I had visited the Netherlands for a couple of weeks, or if I had Dutch visitors in Canada for a few days. Meanwhile, in the Netherlands cashiers wondered why I searched through the European coins as if I were a tourist unfamiliar with the currency while speaking fluent ABN. The way I spoke revealed I was not "from here" in every place I had lived since 1995. Even in Belgium, a country with the same language — we share a dictionary — the dialects are so

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different that I was clearly a foreigner there too.

The editors of the *Australian Financial Review* newspaper in Sydney had not anticipated an accent — undetectable on my resume that showed eight years of experience as a reporter at *Bloomberg News* in Europe, Canada and Australia. In my trial period I proved I was capable enough as a copy-editor to be hired full-time.

In phone calls, of which I had made many professionally as a reporter, my accent was the first impression. Judgements were made — instantly, consciously and subconsciously.

Mom had no accent in Dutch as she had learned the language as a young teenager, though I recalled someone saying, upon hearing she was born in Czechoslovakia, they "could tell." Nonsense. Perhaps she did omit "the", "a", or "an" at times, which was a Czech thing as the language did not use articles; Czechs say *To je po?ita?*, which literally means 'That is computer.'

Now, I kept listening to Oma talking. I did not want to hang up. I did not know if I would ever speak to her again, hear her voice again, in any language. If only I had learned Czech, I could have understood what she was saying, how she felt, what was on her mind — instead all I could do was listen to the sound of her voice, the sound of a distant past revived by her dementia.

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One A3-size photo album sufficed to contain all the photos Oma had from her family in Czechoslovakia. The impenetrable border that cut off Oma and Mom from their roots for nearly four decades also created a mental block to accessing memories. Only after the Iron Curtain came down on November 9, 1989, did the past begin to emerge, slowly, carefully, reluctantly — selectively. In 1990 my parents, sister and I travelled in our white station-wagon Volvo to what was still Czechoslovakia — showing our passports as we crossed the border I could see Mom's unease as our papers were scrutinized: after all these years of freedom, she still did not take it for granted and felt it could be taken away at any time; her Dutch passport listed her place of birth: Meclov.

During that three-week holiday I kept a journal, which displays a now-painful lack of understanding, and appreciation, of the meaning of this trip. The 20-year-old I was then failed to grasp the true importance of our visit and the full opportunity to learn; partly because I did not have a clue as to the real history and story behind Oma, her late husband, and Mom; partly it was my youth and the accompanying self-centredness of my transition into a young adult. I had since also realized that as children we had learned, subconsciously, which topics or areas to avoid with our parents, grandparents. After chastising myself in

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recent years for my ignorance and cowardice to ask certain questions, I was beginning to understand I was far from alone.

“It didn’t occur to me to ask my father as I grew up why he had nothing from his past before the war — no pictures of himself when young, no family photographs, no mementos of any kind. He was a man without a past, and I failed to notice,” writes Annette Kobak in the opening paragraph of *Joe’s War: My Father Decoded.*

It was similar for prominent Israeli journalist Gideon Levy, who recently visited the Czech town of Zatec, where his father was born and raised before he fled in 1939. “Our father told us nothing, and we asked him nothing. He did not want to tell and we, how horrible, did not want to hear.”

In my case, I had been afraid to *ask* — to stir up difficult emotions by asking the wrong questions. And now, as I might finally summon the courage, it seemed too late. Despite the improvement in Oma’s new full-care living environment, it became painfully clear when I called her there for the first time that she had suffered a setback in her overall cognition.

A nurse answered, saying she’d pass the phone to Oma.

I heard her familiar breathing, her voice.

“Oma? It’s Margreet.”

She seemed confused by the phone. I tried again but I might as well have been talking to myself. Oma had no idea who I was, she barely responded before I heard what sounded like her putting down the phone beside her, without hanging up. I could not bring myself to disconnect as I sat in a corner of the dark-brown fabric sectional that dominates our spacious living room and tried to picture Oma in a new environment that was probably still as foreign to her as it was to me. I listened to Oma’s incoherent chat with a fellow resident. Oma spoke in Dutch but in a way I felt even further removed than when she had spoken to me in Czech. Then at least she had recognized my voice. We had a connection then. This time I was nobody. A stranger.

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The final day of March was Oma’s 97th birthday. The last time we spoke, she had no idea who I was and did not want to speak to me. It had been the first time she did not recognize me. I hadn’t called her since. It embarrassed me just as much as it saddened me that I was afraid to call the woman I had been close to my entire life, the maternal grandmother I was named after. I was scared to find confirmation that she indeed no longer knew who I was. I felt ashamed that I could not bring myself to pick up the phone, that I thought more about

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my own feelings than hers, but it was too painful. It felt like I had lost her. I struggled with my own inertia but was unable to snap out of it.

Yet I couldn't *not* call on her birthday. A nurse named Carla answered. In Dutch I asked to speak to Mrs Nammensma — Oma had kept her second husband's last name. "She's here on the couch, snoozing. I think she's a little tired but I'll hold the phone to her ear," Carla said.

"Happy birthday Oma! Tim and Luka also wish you a happy birthday!"

There was no response.

I started singing the Dutch version of *Happy Birthday to You.* Silence.

"She's listening but she seems very tired," Carla said.

"OK, can you please hold the phone to her ear again? I'll just talk to her for a bit."

I repeated that Tim, Luka and I wished her a happy birthday, and that we hoped she was having a great day, that we wished her health and happiness for the year ahead.

I got ready to hang up, sad to think I could no longer reach her.

"Who is this?" I heard Oma say.

"It's Margreet!"

"Where are you?"

"I'm in Canada."

"Oh. Well, that's been a long time. A year at least." And Oma kept speaking; she knew who I was and we had a conversation for the first time in nine months. I had anticipated she would neither recognize me nor speak to me, as had been the case the last couple of times. Instead, we chatted for 20 minutes. She asked if I was getting married too—my younger sister had recently got engaged. When I said I was not, she said, "Good!" We both laughed. Oma did not disapprove of marriage. She approved of a woman's independence — she was married twice, widowed twice before she turned 40. Marriage brought no guarantees.

Oma talked about the way nurses in her new home spoke to her. "I have not fought with anyone here. They always ask 'Mrs Nammensma, how shall we do this?' and 'Mrs Nammensma, what do you think about that?' It is very different." Yet she said she was still a foreigner, the perennial outsider, even after all these years in the Netherlands. We signed off with the sound of kisses on both ends of the line, as we used to do. She was reluctant to hang up, and so was I.

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What would happen to me if I learned to speak Czech? What would that feel like? I found myself writing these sentences in my journal the next day.

Czech is a language with about 12 million native speakers, most of whom live, of course, in the Czech Republic, which has a population of about 10.5 million. Czech is closely related to Slovak and Polish, all West Slavonic languages.

"A thousand-year history flows through each word. We do something magnificently old and historic when we speak Czech," wrote Czech author and playwright Karel ?apek.

The very existence of the language, however, has been challenged twice in the last century alone. Hitler said, in the third year of Nazi Germany's occupation of Czechoslovakia, "it ought to be possible in about twenty years to push the Czech language back to the importance of a dialect." Next, the Communists imposed the Russian language on the country's school children. Mom was among them.

Studying Czech was not a new thought for me, but it had never arrived in such a firm and compelling fashion as it did this time. I doubted I'd be able to learn quickly enough to converse with Oma. But perhaps there was another reason to learn Czech, or perhaps I did not even need one. Anna, a former colleague from the UK, had moved from Hong Kong to Brussels and began studying Czech — just for fun. And when living a few months in Japan, my friend Fiona studied hard enough to pass a test ranking her Japanese language skills at a level sufficient to apply for university there — which she had no intention of doing. Learning Italian was part of Elizabeth Gilbert's pilgrimage in *Eat. Pray. Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia.* I liked how Gilbert's efforts were not based on a need, practical requirement or intended application — she learned Italian because she felt like it, as did most foreign students in her language class.

I researched my options. I wanted a home study or something online. Something I could do at my own pace, starting as soon as possible and that was affordable. A company called Pimsleur offered a beginners' course consisting of 30 lessons, purchased either at once or in increments of five lessons at a time. The digital audio version was the cheapest and could be downloaded. Looking at it on my Kindle, I wondered if it was worth spending $129.95 for this 16-hour home course. Maybe I should first download a free sample to check it out.

Oh crap. Instead of "Try a Sample" I accidentally clicked the "Buy" option for all 30 units. This had never happened to me before — and I had owned my Kindle for two years. Where was the refund option? Luka, our dog, looked up from his couch in the bay window of our living room, before stretching and relaxing back down. We were home alone; Tim was at a board meeting for the Squamish Titans, the local triathlon club.

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Perhaps I had to check this Pimsleur course out first. After all, this unintended purchase could be a sign. I did not mind taking a hint from the Universe every now and then. I pressed play, impatiently skipped the introductory instructions and headed straight for Lesson 1.

“Listen to this conversation,” a male voice said.

“*Promeete, rossumeete Anglitsky*?” a second male voice said.

“*Ne, nerossumeem,*” said a female voice.

“*Trochoo rossumeem Chessky,*” the second man again.

“*Ste Ameritsan*?” asked the woman.

“*Anno,*” said guy No. 2.

“In the next few minutes you will learn not only to understand this conversation, but also to take part in it yourself,” promised the original male voice. He was right. Half an hour — and one audio lesson — later I decided to keep the course.

I emailed my friend Graham, a former CIA station chief in Kabul and an expert on the Middle East and languages, for advice. He had studied 16 languages including Russian, Persian, Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, Greek, and Turkish.

“Czech is not all that easy; like other Slavic languages lots of (unnecessary) endings and irregularities. I don't really know it, but know Russian well. It is mildly harder than Russian I think due to a few added grammatical demands, but there is much encouraging arts and music in it, including great Dvorak and Smetana and Janacek operas. Ear exercises are very important as well as the written word,” he responded.

Graham also dropped off his book, *How to Learn a Foreign Language*, which encourages language students to gather as many resources as possible — courses, books, movies, and native speakers. “One’s native language is one of the closest and dearest things to a person. Not for nothing do we call it ‘the mother tongue’,” Graham writes.

I took Lesson 2 while riding my road bike on the wind trainer. Instead of listening to music on my iPod to entertain myself in that stationary mode, I plugged into Czech audio lessons on my Kindle. Half an hour of listening, repeating, slowly pronouncing foreign words as guided by the voices, thinking, recalling, answering. It almost seemed easy.

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Having finished my Pimsleur course, I registered with Charles University in Prague to continue my Czech language journey in their online program. The five course modules I purchased consisted of 14 lessons and a so-called revision test, technically five months’

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worth of study but I gained access until the end of the next school year, July 2014.

Funny cartoon-like pictures illustrated new words being introduced to my vocabulary. But this course had grammar too. Czech grammar is hard. I struggled with my introduction to the seven cases in Czech — which essentially means you have to learn many different forms of most words and know when to use which.

When I was little, Oma had tried to teach me Czech tongue-twisting rhymes, like *T?ista t?icet t?i st?íbrných st?íka?ek st?íkalo p?es t?ista t?icet t?i st?íbrných st?ech* — 333 silver fire engines sprayed over 333 silver roofs, meant to teach the teeth and tongue to cooperate in pronouncing arguably the hardest sound of the language — the *?*; you essentially lift your lips while putting the upper and lower front teeth together, and then make a T-sound turning into an R, and then an S.

I also knew *dobrý den* — hello or good day, *dobrou noc* — good night or sleep well, and *d?kuji* — thank you. The sentences I learned for my first trip to Czechoslovakia with my parents and sister in 1990 after the fall of the Iron Curtain reflected my interests at the time: as a 20-year-old student I learned to ask for the nearest pub — *Radi bychom do hospody*? I could also ask for mustard — *Máte taky ho??ice*? — when I ate *knedlík*, Czech dumplings, instead of the heavy gravy they were typically served with. I could count to ten; *jeden, dva, t?i, ?ty?i, p?t, šest, sedm, osm, dev?t, deset.* And, most importantly, I knew *nerozumím* — I do not understand.

Back then, learning Czech had seemed too hard, unnecessary. Now, I pondered a pilgrimage into the language that could have been my first, because I was curious to find out what I would discover in it. I wondered if it would fit me in a way I had often felt Dutch did not. It was a strange sensation, not feeling at home in my mother tongue, the only language I spoke fluently as a child and teenager, and I could not explain it.

Language is identity, belonging, tension. Language includes, excludes. It forms, shapes. And rejects too. Someone who speaks another language poorly, imperfectly — even as they can hold a conversation, get and make jokes — is often automatically judged less intelligent. We speak slower, louder to that person as if they were a little dumber, not just because we think they might hear better. We live in an environment where we are judged by our ability to express ourselves.

I was hesitant to tell Mom about my latest plan to learn Czech, as I had made some half-hearted attempts in recent years. However, those false starts were of value; they taught me that I did not do anything until I truly committed to doing it. It was about starting, creating a new habit I could sustain over weeks, months, and years. As a marathon runner, I knew that doing a little bit each day added up to a lot over the long run, and it was going to be a long

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run if I wanted to arrive at a level of proficiency that allowed me to read, write and speak freely. I planned to make an honest effort this time. I had more motivation, a different kind of motivation, and I was a different person — or perhaps I was the same person, but understood better who that was and what she was searching for.

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