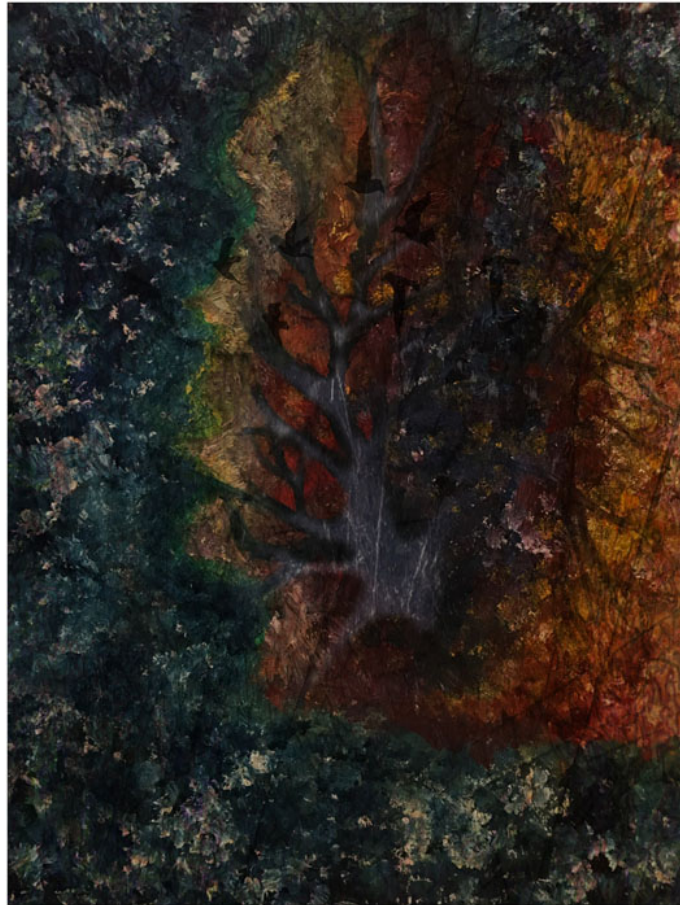


ESSAY

Lost Letters from the Past

by Anya Weimann



"Roots" by Sreyash Sarkar

As the bus pulled away from the main markets in Phnom Penh, I leaned my head against the cold window. I had arrived here only a few days ago and the scene still struck me: the squashed marked stalls with their colourful cellophane wrapping, the sheer number of Tuk-tuks and motos, the various street vendors delicately weaving in between traffic, the child beggars in threadbare clothing, pressing their pleading faces against the windows.

I thought about the past months. How lost and insecure I had felt after my university degree, how my life lacked direction at that time. How I was looking for new ways to bring meaning into my life. How I had found that ad on a notice board and applied for a volunteer position in marketing with an aid organisation that offered educational programs to disadvantaged youth in Sihanoukville, a small seaport town in Cambodia. And how, somehow, the letters my grandparents had written to each other during the Second World War had encouraged me to go, to be brave and out there in the world.

Outside the window the landscape started to change. The crowded streets of downtown Phnom Penh gave way to the wide open. The huts along the road became fewer and fewer until there was nothing but that long dusty red soil road stretching out endlessly into the horizon. There are no regrets, just new beginnings, I thought to myself before I drifted off into a dizzy sleep.

One week earlier I had found a bunch of old letters in the attic of my parents' house in Germany. The old, yellowed paper had gone soft and frail over the years, and the handwriting had started to fade away with time.

“The long wait is one of the cruellest things,” my grandmother had written in the summer of 1944. “You are the first thought in the morning, and the last one at night. There’s still hope... I know we’ll make it out alive.” So much love and longing between the lines. “Soon my darling, soon,” my grandfather had replied. “Often I look at your photograph and catch myself forgetting all the plight surrounding me. Then, I start to dream again, just from looking at your beautiful face. We’ll see each other again.”

There were about a hundred letters my grandparents had written to each other during the Second World War. On an impulse, I had randomly taken three letters and stuffed them into my bag. Their sweet words had looped and crossed time, survived the war and would now even travel all the way to Cambodia with me.

The Second World War. Two lovers.

Nights spent missing each other, fearing for each other’s lives.

A variety of emotions brought to life: hope, despair, relief. And holding on to the dream of better days to come and a life to spend together after the war.

And a nightingale's song they both heard late at night, even though they were hundreds of miles apart.

To me, those weren't just words. This was the story of my grandparents. This was my history.

My grandmother had died when I was five, my grandfather when I was ten years old. I never knew much about the life they had led during the war. There were so few memories left of them. The old, weather-beaten house at the edge of a small village, surrounded by green hills and golden fields and a creek with a small bridge, where I liked to sit in summer and hold my feet into the icy-cold water while my grandparent's dog swam in the current.

My grandfather in his crisp suits and long-sleeved flannel shirts, wearing one of these furry Cossack hats to cover his bald head. The sunglasses he wore because of an inherited eye disease. The way he spoke — very slowly, always making a long, meaningful pause at the end of each sentence, followed by a long drag from his cigarette. His study with an impressive collection of black Leitz folders, his desk with the overflowing ashtray and yellowed newspaper clippings. A variety of prescription drugs on the antique serving cabinet in the dining room. And then my grandmother — her beautiful face and kind blue eyes, her fine, delicate hands and her still blond hair with only a few strands of silver grey. The perfume bottles and the small porcelain ballet dancer on her dressing table, her nightgown draped over the pouffe from the last time she had dropped it there. Both of them sitting outside on the front porch beneath the Jacaranda tree in the sun, while the pink popsicle in my hand was melting away.

I was too young. They both died too early. What I knew at that time: My grandparents had met during the war. My grandmother had been a nurse, my grandfather a med student who worked as a combat medic in various field hospitals across Europe. Growing up, I hadn't shown a particularly strong interest in getting to know the history of my family in great detail. In my family no one really spoke about family affairs anyway. Until then, I was aware of a few facts and those were enough for me to establish my family's past in a broad, satisfying sketch.

Then, one night during my first week in Sihanoukville, I had looked closer at the letters. It had been the last of the annual three-day admission process at school. My to-do list was

longer than usual. Apart from my general assigned tasks, such as assisting the staff in promoting the school's educational program for disadvantaged youth, working on new content for the school's website, and overlooking sponsorship applications, I added a few more things to my list. *Print papers for the entrance exams. Help prepare exam setup in the assembly hall. Distribute pens and paper. Check schedule for admission interviews. Organise scholarship application forms.*

That day I hadn't been able to tick a lot of boxes. Hundreds of new applicants had visited the school to take the entrance exams. There were long queues outside the office. All day long I had witnessed interviews with distraught families who had come from far-away provinces, begging to have their children accepted into the school's program. The pleading faces of the parents, the dark, longing eyes of the children, their bare, often sore feet and the deep lines in their hands, all telling stories of hard work and hardships. I was desperate for something else to be thinking of.

That night, while crickets drummed their beat and the aircon had stopped working, I read the old, tattered love letters my grandparents had written to each other during the war again. Reading had been nothing but a banal, trivial thing. The only intention I had at that moment was to reach out for something that connected me to my world, to the roots I was coming from. All I had wanted was to find some distraction, maybe even some kind of comfort. "Everything seems so bleak and empty without you, like a nightmare!" my grandfather had written in the letters. *Bleak* and *empty* — worn out from the day, those words resonated with me. Even though I was in a different situation, I felt the same. I turned the letter around. On its back, it revealed an imprint of the German coat of arms, a black eagle holding the emblem of the swastika between its talons. *Waffen-SS* was printed in sharp, blue ink above. And there was a military title placed in front of my grandfather's name, *SS-Unterscharführer, SS junior squad leader.*

It was there that everything became still. I could hear the chatter of children in the background, and the softly tingling bells of the grazing cattle in the near distance, the rise and fall of my chest. An unfamiliar dark ache spread inside of me.

For most of the night I was wide awake. What did it all mean? Either all this had been a terrible mistake. Or my grandfather had been a member of the *Waffen-SS*, the military branch of the notorious Nazi Party's *SS* organisation. This, in essence, meant that he had been a Nazi.

All throughout my six months volunteer placement in Cambodia I felt like I was drowning, like I was losing ground and hopelessly falling fast through the safety net. The life I knew was resolving under the weight of my discovery. My grandmother had written in one of the letters: “Sometimes I just want to run away! Whenever I am sad, you comfort me. Only the thought of you gives me some courage and strength. And still, everything remains so extremely dreadful and difficult.” Often, I felt the same, only that I had no significant other to lean on to, no one that I could confide into.

On the outside, it was this wild new country I was struggling with. The incredible heat and humidity, the exotic sounds of a foreign town, the intense smell, a thick blend of pollution and waste, of ocean breeze and stir-fried vegetables, and the constant attention I got as the small, white Western girl. On the inside, there was something else, something much more personal that drew my attention. The discovery of my grandfather's past, the incredible possibility that he had been a Nazi, seemed to tug at my very core, slowly tearing me apart.

In the days to come, memories and images of my grandfather kept coming back to me. During the mornings in the small, cluttered office with an assembly of discarded desks and shelves, my mind drifted off to what I remembered of my grandfather. As I went through everyday office procedures, scenes from my own childhood crystalized in my mind. The discovery about my grandfather's past seemed to have opened a lock to a gate of long-lost memories. In between preparing thank you notes for donors and processing sponsorship applications, I often traveled back to that old, weather-beaten house, where my grandfather had lived alone for a few years after my grandmother had passed away.

Sharp and with a vengeance more details randomly turned up like ghosts from the past. The crowded house, full of mysterious things, such as old medical instruments and small glass bottles with prescription drugs. The thick cigarette smoke around the house, the yellowed wallpaper and stained curtains. The green front door that led outside into the garden with the white pavilion overgrown with ivy. And beneath my grandmother's beloved rose bushes the bird feeder with small, white birds in open flight attached to it. The bird in the middle was standing tall, even though one of his wings had gone missing. Somehow the bird with its broken wings had always reminded me of my grandfather: a broken old man with clipped wings.

My grandfather had been a figure in his world, that is to say, small town existence and beyond. An early-retired man, a tinkerer turned amateur lawyer with the tendency to stir up a hornets' nest and say things that made others feel highly uncomfortable.

When I was little I used to watch him carefully as he sat in his chair by the window, blowing thick cigarette smoke into the air that sailed across the room like a heavy veil floating in a

soft breeze. It was almost as if he was stuck in the moment, his eyes wide open and his presence beneath gone elsewhere. Somehow he looked stunned and his gaze was locked inwards as if in some kind of terror. To me it seemed as if my grandfather was gone to some other place. The way I remember my grandfather: smoking and staring into the distance, choking and clicking his dentures.

Sometimes I had the impression that something in his life must have gone awry and that things hadn't turned out the way he had hoped for in the beginning. I wasn't exactly sure what that was. At the age of five I knew as much as that he had been to war a long time ago, and that that hadn't been a nice place to be. As I didn't know how to ask any further, I just sometimes held his hand and hoped that the small gesture of holding hands would help ease the pain he felt and make the darkness go away. I imagined keeping him safe that way. I wanted to let him know that I understood. But, of course, I didn't. I was three, five, seven years old. And my grandfather was an old man who continued sliding away.

When the thinking and searching got too much, I kept reminding myself where I was: in Cambodia, a country in the southern portion of Southeast Asia, wedged between Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. A country whose landscape was dominated by low-lying plains and divided by the Mekong River. A country that was known for the glittering Royal Palace of Phnom Penh and the ancient temple complex of Angkor Wat. A country whose sad history included the Killing Fields and the horrors of the Cambodian genocide brought on by the Khmer Rouge Regime. A country that counted among the poorest countries in the world, where wide regions were still left unexplored.

Often I wondered about that strange timing. Why here of all places? Why now? From Germany those letters had travelled with me almost nine thousand miles to a small seaport town in Cambodia. From the urban jungle of Sihanoukville to the field hospitals in a war-torn Europe, history had crossed time and place. I had found out about my grandfather's Third Reich past in the strangest way possible. I was far away from home. I was vulnerable and alone when this strange news broke.

That monsoon season became my research season. While the rain came down in torrents, I sat in my small room and typed various search terms into Google. *Nazi. Waffen-SS. Schutzstaffel. SS-Unterscharführer.* Night after night I looked at black and white photographs of young men in high shaft boots and military uniforms. Tough and invincible. Most of them looked like my grandfather in his early twenties: tall and athletic, blond and

blue-eyed. It seemed impossible that my grandfather should have been one of these brutes, at the same time composing letters full of love and longing. “Sometimes I could really give up on life. But the thought of you and the memories we shared brighten my days. Maybe you can understand that I often long for a sign from you?”

Often, I had to pause midway through my research. How strange and surreal it all seemed: the letters, the discovery of my grandfather’s past, and then, playing Bos Angkunh, a ball game, with children in threadbare clothing and eating sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves on Otres Beach.

I made a list of people who maybe knew something, anything, about my grandfather and his past in Nazi Germany. I placed my parents, in particular my father, on top of the list. Then I added my sister and my maternal grandmother. Somehow I was reluctant to reach out to all of them from over here. This was a delicate, private matter. For some reason I couldn’t talk about it, I couldn’t tell family or friends from afar. I decided that I would bring this strange news home with me. I wanted to deliver my discovery and all the questions arising from it in person. In particular, I wanted to see my father's face, I wanted to see my mother's initial reaction. Often, I imagined that scene, the three of us together and me breaking this strange news to them. Sometimes we were sitting in my parents' backyard, at others we were tucked away in a quiet corner of a restaurant. How would I do it? How to bring the impossible, the desolate to someone close? And then, when was the right time to tell? “I have to deal with all this on my own. (...) This too shall pass; everything will be fine again,” my grandfather had written. *This too shall pass*. I just had to hold on a little longer.

The tremor of the discovery hit me in waves. Disbelief, shock and doubt kept welling up inside of me. Desperate, I held on to the thinnest of threads. What if all this had just been a mistake, an unfortunate mix-up? A misplaced envelope, the wrong military title written before my grandfather's name? Even though I instinctively knew that it was unlikely I contemplated the possibility of error. Just a simple error. *Errare humanum est. To err is human*. That's what my grandfather had said sometimes. A simple Latin proverb, one of many that he, fond of quotes and references, had dropped from time to time.

But no matter from which angle I tried to look at it, it all ran through my fingers like quick sand running through an hourglass. On some days I woke and felt like I was returning from a bad dream. On others, it hit me immediately in my wake. Sharp like those two letters in front of my grandfather's name, the shock cut through me like a knife. Sometimes there was this tingling running down the back of my spine and through the length of my limbs. In the mirror, it was the reflection of my face that kept reminding me of where I came from.

German ancestry. A Nazi in the family. Granddaughter of a Nazi.

After the initial shock about my discovery had begun to ebb away, I forced myself to be out there in my new Cambodian world.

Each day I rose early and went for a morning run by myself. I watched the last rosy fringes of sunrise hanging on the edges of the mountains as I paced along the dusty red soil road that stretched all the way from the schooling complex through steep hills and bare, untouched land to the edge of the sea. Through running I did not only explore my new neighbourhood; running became my way to escape the confusion and tension I felt all the time.

I got to know the families who lived in the shacks made out of wooden planks, plastic sheets and rusty metal plates in the neighbourhood. I walked aimlessly along the crowded streets and got lost at the market in downtown. I stumbled along that dusty, rocket-filled road with the kids from my school that lead down to Otres Beach, where I held my face into the soft breeze.

I made friends with Chantou and Navy, who worked as secretaries at my school. On our breaks we talked about how different our lives were, and that, despite our differences, we all shared the same dream: to lead a long and happy life and to bring some meaning into the world.

Sometimes all three of us squeezed onto Navy's moto and drove to the beach, where we sat down in the warm sand and watched the fairy lights glitter against the dark sky. Leaning our heads against each other's shoulders, we listened to the sounds of the waves and some traditional Khmer music drifting over from the beach bars close by.

There's a word I learned in Sihanoukville. One day Chantou asked me what word I'd give to my overall experience here. I paused and then tried to explain to her how I felt. Somehow torn and pained, but at the same time moved by so much beauty. Chantou smiled and then said that the Khmer word for this would be *chu-chort*.

Throughout my time in Cambodia I continued to feel this bittersweet melancholy. Even though I was moved by this country and the stories of its people, my grandfather and his incredible, impossible past in Nazi Germany never really left my mind. My grandfather was part of everything I discovered in Cambodia. Somehow I could feel the weight of my discovery in anything. Without any obvious connection he was in the crowds of people weaving through the thick traffic at the Golden Lions Roundabout, he sat next to me in the

small boat on the dolphin watch in the midst of Ream National Park, he walked next to me through the ancient ruins of Angkor Wat and looked at me through the wrinkled face of the old, blind man begging at the entrance to the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh.

Chu-chort. Chu-chort.

On my very last day in Sihanoukville, I woke up early. For a while I listened to the sounds I had come across over the past months: the chatter of children in the background, the softly tingling bells of grazing cattle, a rooster crowing in the distance. For the very last time I went on my morning run. I ran past the small huts and rocky hills, the endless red soil road stretching out in front of me. I smelled the mist rising up from the rice fields, the smoke coming from the village and I remembered Chantou's word: *Chu-chort*.

Chu-chort. Even though the discovery about my grandfather's past had overshadowed my time in Cambodia, it hadn't been able to take all this away from me. The beauty of this country, the wild, untamed spirits that rose from the land, the kindness I had experienced from its people.

In the beginning I didn't know where this discovery would lead me, but now I knew one thing: there couldn't have been a better place to begin this journey into my grandfather's past. Because Sihanoukville, the small seaport town with its soft, white beaches, its natural beauty and sweet innocence stood in sharp contrast to the dark secret I had discovered. And all this had saved me.

As I stood amidst the morning light, I suddenly knew: my grandfather's past was my grandfather's past. And even though the vast dimensions of his history were now deeply engraved into mine, his story, this long kept secret, wasn't powerful enough to completely overshadow my present. I didn't know then what the future would bring, what else would come up to the surface.

This was the end of my time here in Cambodia, but at the same time the beginning of something new. Another journey was on the horizon, one that wasn't about travelling foreign continents and exploring new countries, but one that would lead me further into the unknown history of my family's past and towards the roots where I was coming from.