

Remembering

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Watching the stock market collapse, seeing my retirement savings disappear, I find myself thinking back to my parents' era and the stories they told of the times before I was born.

My father was the son of Norwegian immigrants in Wisconsin, where his father worked on the railroad. But my grandfather died when Dad was a teenager, leaving his mother a widow with a small pension. (A few years ago, when I was speaking in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, a woman in the audience went to the town records and looked up the address of my father's boyhood home. "It's not a very nice neighborhood," she told me apologetically)

Dad went to college and dental school on scholarships, working in a canning factory throughout his years of school. Like most children of immigrant families, he became better educated than his parents. Trouble was: he graduated from dental school in 1929. No one had jobs, no one had savings, no one had money, no one went to the dentist. With a mother and teenage sister dependent on him, he couldn't make a living.

The US Army had one opening for a dentist, and they administered a national test for applicants. My father got the place, and with it a job, an income, benefits, and a future. He was sent to the War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, for officer's training, and it was there that he met my mother.

My mother was the daughter of a bank president in that small college town that had just two banks. She had just finished college and was living at home, teaching nursery school.

My grandfather—oh, I wish he were alive and I could ask him the details of this!—felt the run on the banks coming. His bank was insured. He called Washington and had cash sent by train to cover his deposits. My mother remembered Grandpa going to the little train station with a police escort in the middle of the night, to receive the cash. When the crash came, he had the money there in his bank and so none of his depositors lost anything. His bank went on to flourish in the years to come and I believe it still exists today.

The other bank did not have the deposits covered. The other bank president, a close friend of my grandparents, lived just down the street. One of his children had a birthday party that day. After the party, he went up to the attic and shot himself in the head.

Next month I am actually going back to that small town to speak at the Historical Society and I'm hoping I'll have time to see some of the records and newspapers surrounding those events...my description comes only from my mother's memories; luckily she was a story-teller. Dad was not. Things emerged from Dad in bits and pieces triggered by some odd detail. He would pick up a can of peas, examine it, and say "Number Two Sweets"---and we knew he was, in his mind, sorting cans at the canning factory where he worked as a student.

(He did, once, tell a sweet story...something he always felt embarrassed about in retrospect. He lived in a kind of boarding house when he was in dental school, and to pay his rent he worked as a waiter, serving the meals there. The woman who ran the place always wrote out

the menu for the guests, and one time Dad went to her, he said, and told her she had misspelled something. pShe had written "Cole Slaw" p--- pit was something he had never heard of. He pointed out that it should have said "Cold Slaw." pHe was still cringing when he was 90 years old, remembering how patiently she had explained to him what cole slaw was).

Anyway: I am wondering today how they would feel in these times. pAlthough they (we) lived a relatively affluent life, my parents never had a credit card and never bought a car or a house except for cash. pThey desperately feared debt. pl think they were like many of their generation. History is made up of personal stories.

This weekend I will be speaking in Lincoln, Nebraska, about NUMBER THE STARS, following a personal reminiscence by a Holocaust survivor.

Telling our stories to one another is what makes us human and what helps us to understand history.

Tags: Untagged