Good evening. Welcome to the Filson. We're here for another exciting lecture tonight. I am Stuart Goldberg. I'm a member of the Board of Directors of the Filson Historical Society. And we are so pleased that you are joining us for this exciting lecture tonight. And tonight, I am pleased to introduce Georgia Hunter, author of we were the lucky ones. She received her BA in psychology from the University of Virginia. From a young age her personal essays and photos have been featured in The New York Times while we travel, and travel girl magazine in on equitrekking.com Sounds like a fascinating website. He is also a freelance writer in the world of adventure travel. In the year 2000, she learned the intriguing war stories of her grandfather and his family. This led her to uncovering and recording her family's history. And eventually, this became the bones of her novel, we were the lucky ones. We are now about to hear the rest of the story. So please join me in giving a warm welcome to Georgia Hunter.

Thank you, Stuart, that was such a nice introduction. And thank you, Scott, for all the help getting all the setup into the Filson Historical Society. This is such a gorgeous venue. And I spent a little time walking through the exhibit that's up just next door about family stories and genealogy and artifacts. And I encourage you all to do it. It seemed like such a natural fit when I got the invitation to come speak that that's the exhibit that's up now. And there's some really amazing artifacts, letters, wedding gowns, children's clothes. So go take a look. And thank you all for being here tonight. I'm so honored and excited to give this talk and I want to say a very special thanks also to Louisville has a very special place in my heart because my horse family is here. I've poorest family all over. But my friends over there are my home away from home. When I come here. I feel like I am surrounded by the most loving people. So I've got trainers, Keith and Lisa, and Alyssa. My girlfriend, I was another Alyssa who I grew up riding with since maybe 25 years ago. I've got friends here for the second or third time. So sorry, guys are gonna be a couple new things in this talk, I promise from Vancouver. So thank you all. I just appreciate your support so much. Thank you all for coming. I'm curious to know, has anybody read? We were the lucky ones? Oh, good. Oh, good. Wow. Okay. Well, today, what I thought I would do is sort of tell you a little bit of the story behind the story. As Stuart mentioned, this was a piece of
my family history that I discovered a little bit later in life in my teens. And so for as many questions as I get asked about the story itself, I often get almost more questions about the discovery process and what it was like to uncover this piece of my ancestry. So first off, in a nutshell, we were the lucky ones, follows my grandfather and his siblings and his parents, a family of Polish Jews as they scattered at the start of the Second World War, sort of on this twofold mission first to survive, and second to reunite. And what a lot of people find interesting about this piece of my story is that I had no idea it existed until I was 15 years old. And it's especially interesting because I lived right down the street from my grandfather. We were very very close. This is me at age one with my grandfather who's Addy in the book by the way, if you pick up the book chapter one, it opens with Addy and Paris. And and here we are. We lived in small town Massachusetts. We spent holidays together birthdays, family meals, and yet growing up for the first 14 years of my life until he died I had no idea. This was he had a Polish Holocaust history. He had changed his name once he moved to the States to Eddie Cortes from Addy quark. He had become an American through and through. He looking back I might say there were some quirks that I could attribute to his European pneus he was very resourceful. He made a lot of the things in his home by hand. he wove the curtains that hung in the living room from a loom that he built by hand lived in the basement. He had clay busts of his children that he sculpted by hand from a photograph that his brother Jacob took he had all these funny contraptions in the bathroom to hang the soap from a magnet because he thought the soap dish was gross it would get you know slimy so he embedded magnets into his so weird little quirky things that looking back now I'm like, Hi. He was very resourceful. He made us speak French at the dinner table, things like that. But growing up I just had I never I never heard an accent. I was not raised Jewish. My mother was not raised Jewish. It was a piece of his past that he chose to put behind him. So it wasn't until I was in high school when an English teacher assigned our class a project called an eye search that this piece of his history came to be came to light. He had passed away the year before. And I decided to sit down with my grandmother, Caroline, who you also meet towards the end of the book. And it was over that hour with her. And I remember vividly sitting in her home in Massachusetts, and she had this beautiful kind of shoulder length, silky silver hair, and she liked it when I would braid it. And so I remember sitting by the window and braiding her hair, and talking and asking questions, and over the course of that hour learning that, that I was a quarter Polish Jewish, and that my grandfather came from this very large family of Holocaust survivors. The discovery was quite a shock, as you can imagine, but I never felt angry or resentful about it. I remember feeling just extremely curious. I had 1000 questions, and I craved answers. And my sweet grandmother was able to answer some of them. And she was able to tell me about my grandfather's piece of the story, which was that he was the only one of his family members living in France at the start of the war, the rest were in Poland, and that somehow, he managed to find a ticket on a boat leaving Marcee do for Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. She said that he actually met a woman on that boat she named called her Elizabeth, and that they were actually engaged. So lucky for me that did not work out. But she mentioned that there was this romance. She said, once he finally got to Brazilian soil that he lost touch with the family, in Poland, and for the duration of the war, had no idea if they would see if he would ever see them again. And I said, Well, what about that family? How did they manage to survive? I knew enough in my Holocaust studies, at the time that the odds were severely against them. And she said, You know, I met your grandfather's family after the war. And like your grandfather, they rarely spoke about that time. So I'd have to wait several years for some more answers. And that happened at a family reunion that my mother organized at our home on Martha's Vineyard. And in this photograph, I'll point out my grandmother Caroline here, the matriarch. And if you read the book and met my grandfather's sister Mila, and her little girl, Felicia, this is Felicia, who was one year old at the start of the war. I'm up here. And as you can see, cousins galore. This is just actually a portion of us. We were 32. And all my mother's one of the 10 first cousins from her father's side, and she invited them
and they all immediately agreed to come. And they showed up from France and Brazil and Israel and across the state. And it was a wild, musical, chaotic week together where lots of different kinds of food were prepared and languages being spoken. And I met cousins I'd never met before. And it was it was it was incredible. And one night of that reunion. I wandered outside to where my mom's generation was sitting on the back porch, and talking and I sat down next to an aunt, my aunt Kath, and I started listening and I realized that they were telling stories about the war and about my grandfather. And that's when I first got little snippets of the greater Kirk family story. For example, Josie was there. He's one of my mother's cousins. He was born in Siberia. He doesn't know he at the time didn't know why his parents had been sent to Siberia and early years of the war. He didn't know when his actual birthday was. He just knew that his mother told him he was born in the dead of winter. And it was so cold when he would wake up as a newborn that his eyes would be frozen shut, and she would coax them open with her breast milk. Another cousin, Anna talked about how her parents her mother hiked over the Austrian Alps to safety after the war, while pregnant. Another cousin Viktor talked about how his parents who had been in love since their young teenage years, once the war began, decided they couldn't wait any longer to get married. And so they found a rabbi to come out of hiding. And in a very dangerous, very illegal ceremony. We're married and a little blacked out home and love to candlelight service. I heard about false IDs. I heard about a disguised circumcision. I heard about a mother daughter escaped from the ghetto. The story is kind of coming and coming. And I remember sitting there thinking, oh my goodness, how have I never these stories are unbelievable. How have I never heard them before and how has nobody taken the time to write them down? And I can't say I knew right then and there that that somebody would be me. But I think that's when the idea was seated and I couldn't quite let it go. And it would take me another maybe eight years before I finally got the courage to put a stake in the ground and say okay, this is something I'm going to do. And part of the reason why I was nervous to do it was because I knew it would require a lot of travel. So this is a slide showing my research travels I was living in Seattle at the time in 2008, when I set off for my first interview in Paris, and it was important for me to sit down with as many relatives as I possibly could. And Felicia was the first on my list. She was the only living relative with firsthand memories, but the family was everywhere. So, so this is a map. And my first stop, as I said, was to visit with Felicia and Paris. And here I am, my, my sweet husband, Robert came with me on all of my research travels. Here we are with Felicia and her her husband, Louis, in Paris. And this was an amazing couple of days. I knew this would be the most challenging of my interviews because her entire childhood was consumed with knowing nothing else, but the Holocaust being hunted being in hiding, seeing the death and destruction around her. And yet her stories were just remarkable and vivid. And I was so grateful. I was very gentle in my approach with her, but was so grateful for how much she was willing and able to share with me. And I have a special slide that I just added yesterday, and thanks to Scott, we snuck it in here. I want to show you, I did a lot of research and finding of you know, outside research and finding artifacts and photos and things. I had somebody reached out to me last week from Yad Vashem, which is the Holocaust Museum and memorial and Jerusalem and said, I read your book. And I recognize the name in there, Felicia, she knew her as in her married name. She said I have felicia wartime clothing in storage, there was an exhibit that was once on display. And I almost like fainted. I was like, what if I remember the name of the of the display? I'll tell you. But so I said, Well, how do I see them? Can you take pictures? And then the next day, I got an email from a friend from Virginia who said, Hey, I'm gonna be in Israel. Is there anything you need while I'm there? And I said, Well, actually, are you going to Yad Vashem and he said, I am going and I put him in touch with this curator, and, and he was so kind. And she was so kind, and they got together and took pictures. So I'm just going to show you a couple of them. So these are the clothes that Felicia wore as a little girl. And you can actually see on the right this was her false name that she took on in the con when she was in hiding in a convent towards
the end of the war. And I just thought they were so just the patterns are so sweet. And I just, I was so moved by them. So I wanted to show you guys this is just such a recent as this goes to show that this project of unearthing my ancestry will never actually be over. And things are coming up out of nowhere. So that was my first step was to visit with Felicia, my next step was to Rio de Janeiro to visit with some cousins. They're here I am on the left with my mother's cousin Michelle. And we're standing in front of the building where the relatives would have come through when they finally arrived in Brazil. And this is a bay called the Guanabara Bay on the right where my there's an important scene from my grandma grandfather, that takes place here where he borrows a boat and paddles out to meet a ship coming in. And I was really special to stand there kind of in his footsteps. And imagine what that probably didn't look all that different. Imagine what that felt like we visited the archives we found actually, lots and lots of records at the National Archives, which thankfully, my family helped me translate. And I'll come back to my decision at the end to fictionalize the books. Obviously, there was a lot of research involved. But does anybody know where this is? Kovac event? Yeah. I heard you say it? Yeah. So they were as the stories unfolded, through the second generation survivors. And through Felicen, I pieced together a timeline. So I started to figure I kind of went into it thinking, Alright, well, they'll probably be my grandfather's piece, and then the Polish piece, but as soon as I got into the, into the research, I realized, oh, no, actually, the family and Poland scattered too. And they all had their own paths to survival. So hence, the timeline, which I color coded by sibling and kind of tried to keep track and eventually, it took shape. And there were there were a few holes, I thought that were important to fill. That's where I allowed myself some creative license, for example, turns out my grandfather to get on that ship that left Marcee needed a visa, but that visa that he acquired was actually illegal. It expired also when the ship was detained first in Dakar, and then in Casa Blanca. So when he finally arrived in Brazil, six months after he was meant to with an expired visa, I felt like it was an important moment for readers, for me and for readers to have, you know, in the Kirk family story, what what did that day entail the first day of walking on free soil? With his fiancee, you know, with his new love, and so I didn't have that story. And so I there is a scene in the book, I felt it was important and I based that around my own experience. What I did with my husband, Robert, on our first day in Rio, which is walk around Copacabana on this beautiful Avenida Atlantica with this mosaic which I knew existed at a time and I knew my grandfather would have admired and and I knew. And here we are. Here's Robert trying our first sip of coconut water. So that's exactly what Addy and Elisa did. Speaking of the ex fiance once I kind of ran out of once I ran out of relatives to interview I thought who else might have a story to share. And thanks to the web, I was able to find an actually thanks to a book written about the ambassador issuing those illegal visas to refugees fleeing France, fleeing Europe, I found some names listed in the back, I found my grandfather's name, and I found two names that sounded very familiar, at least go Lobero. My grandfather, my grandmother had described my grandfather's ex fiance as Elizabeth low beer, and she had been traveling with her mother. And so at least sca and Gustavo Lobero, were listed in the back of this book. And I found her listed as in a maiden name and a church catalog in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. And somehow I tracked down her address, wrote her a letter the old fashioned way, and with my phone number, and I said, I'm not sure if you remember my grandfather, but you know, I hope so you hope you do. I wasn't sure what mental states you’d be in. And she called me the very day they were letter arrives. Of course, I remember your grandfather, I adored him, come visit me. So my mother and I flew down to Chapel Hill and spent two amazing days with Alaska, and just offered this really incredible window, not just into what, how they managed to get out of Europe and into Brazil. But what it was like from a very human perspective, to be leaving everything and everyone behind to be falling in love, like where they found time for privacy, to what life was like in Rio as they kind of started over. So, so grateful, she was 88 years old and so sharp. And she also had documents, she had the photographs of my grandfather, this was her. At around the age
when she met my grandfather. She even had when my grandfather first got to Brazil, before his
work permit cleared, he worked at a leather book boundary binding books, you know, out of
leather by hand, and she had to have his hand bound leather books, and gave us one. So it was
a very, very special visit. Once I exhausted the oral history piece of my research, I then
thought, Okay, well, I'm sure there are some records out there. And if they're, if they aren't
going to find them. So I think to my timeline could say, Okay, if I knew of a relative was maybe
in Russia at this time, or France at this time, or Poland at this time, I would just reach out to any
archive, town registry, ministry, magistrate and I had read a letter, which often meant hiring a
translator to write a letter and ask about a name. And sure enough, letters started coming back
records started coming back. So this one came back 11 months after I had sent it from the
Ministry of Moscow, and they had a name and a date. Yes, we have record of your great uncle
Ganic. And even if it was just that we you know, he was here he signed the his name on this
document on this date. It was like a little piece of gold. And I would drop that into my, into my
timeline. This was an incredible find through the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. I'm
still unclear, well, why do they have this? Why they have such a deep World War Two database
records, but I found a nine page handwritten account of my great uncle Genex in it. This is my
grandfather's older brother that was sent off to Siberia. And in it he describes the day he was
arrested in the evolve, why he was arrested in Laval, where he and his wife Haritha were sent
and Siberia the name of the camp what they were forced to do the day they were finally
granted amnesty, and then what the year long Exodus entail to then join the army, which was
his only choice at the time. Moving forward, so this was a really, really remarkable finding
because it helps fill a very big gap in Ganic storyline, and it was really special to be able to
hand this over to his two sons. And thanks to those relatives who joined the army, I was able to
find army records and the Polish Army ended up falling under the wing of the British army. So
through the UK Ministry of Defense, I found out exactly where they fought that they had fought
in the Battle of Monte Cassino, which was apparently a very pivotal battle in this at the end of
the war in Italy, and that they had unclaimed Medals of Honor. And so I was actually able to
claim those metals and and return those to the family members. I also had access to some
show interviews. I'm not sure if you're familiar, but Steven Spielberg's initiative, the Shoah
Foundation put survivors in front of video cameras so I got some hefty VHS tapes, which I was
able to watch and that was also that was probably the most specific and special find because I
could see firsthand relatives talking about their explicit experiences. So I had three show
interviews that I was able to use to help fill some, fill some gaps. So that my choice, my
decision came to okay, I've got my timeline, I've got the bones of my story, how do I bring it to
life? How do I write it in a way that is going to feel relevant and visceral and not like a piece of
history. And I it was important for me, I had a child halfway through this process. And I knew
someday he would read the book. And I wanted him to be able to read it, and relate in a way
kind of step into the shoes of his great grandfather and his siblings and experience it as if he
was there. And so as I started writing, I constantly had to reconcile the images I had in my
mind. For example, I had this photograph of my grandfather, during his very short stint in a
Polish column of the French army, I had his sheet music, if you read the book, there's a piece
called list that was done by Vera Graham that made him a little bit famous, he was a composer,
I had this picture of the boat where he met Alaska, the boat that never actually made it to
Brazil, I have this false idea of Halina as I love this picture, because you can see this is the
Polish name they chose Brazeau Rosa, her husband, Adam made false IDs for the family. And
I'm certain that this idea has kept her alive on many, many occasions. I had this photograph of
Jacobs, this was after the war. He and his wife Bella and their baby Viktor here, are boarding
this train to head from Poland into Germany, to Stuttgart, to a displaced persons camp, where
they're hoping they could get a visa and eventually find their way to the states. So if I had a
photograph, a piece of music, a document, I knew that was going to live verbatim in the book.
But I also had to reconcile this sort of dark sepia tone of black and white imagery I had in my
head, and even just the statistics I had in my head, we all have in our heads when we look back at the Holocaust, and this time, and it's almost unfathomable, right to wrap your head around these numbers. And you think about it. I mean, the town where my family was from was once home to 30,000 Jews who made up a third of the population. After the war, there were fewer than 300 survivors. So that alone, that statistic, this is actually my last photo I'll show you is that the ghetto gates to the town where my family is from and Rotom. And I had to remind myself constantly that even though we see we look back with the perspective we have now, and it's very dark time, very dark chapter, the family was living it and color, right. They were living, breathing, they were feeling they were and I wanted to infuse that very human, very colorful dimension into the book. So that's why in the end, I allowed myself the creative license to fictionalize. And I'll read a couple of short passages in a few minutes, that kind of give you an example of how exactly I did that. And the last piece of my research, was to travel in the footsteps of the family through Eastern Europe, I really wanted to see the town where they were from, nobody went back, once the family had left, and survived, they had no interest in going back. And so that was also a bit of a scary thought for me was what is it going to be like to arrive in this town, I mean, this was the image I had that and the statistics. And so my, my husband and I went a couple years ago, and I'm going to show you this very steep street corner and what it looks like today, this is rotten Poland, central Rotom. As you can see, it's beautiful. And so my first impression was I was struck by how quaint and livable and beautiful this little city was. There were wrought iron balconies and street lamps and flowers, and I felt welcome and comfortable. And for the first time, I could see and understand why my great grandparents soul and Nicoma had decided to live there. And that made sense to me, it didn't feel all that different from my little town in Connecticut. This was me at their, their address, this is the entrance to their building, they lived up on the second floor. So I did a lot of hanging around and walking in and out and in and out. And in and out. People thought I was pretty strange. But I could just imagine them doing the same thing. And it was it was very, very grounding to be there. And the place where I knew they had spent so much of their lives. At the same time it was haunting because i I had did have some imagery like this was the rendering of the old synagogue that was once in the center of the town. And today is an empty square and we had a guide a wonderful gentleman named Jacob actually who took us around and he explained that the synagogue was first occupied by the Nazis turned it into a stable and then burned it to the ground. And today this is what you know, they've they have not filled the space. This is sort of what remains. And I also had this image of the old Jewish cemetery outside of town and our guide was really wanted to show us you know, the before and after, as you can see, it was beautiful, prolific there are these ornate engravings and well kept and today there are barely any headstones remaining, it's very sparse. And again, Jacob explained that during the war, the Nazis came and ripped up the headstones to build an airstrip outside of town. So I had this very double experience of, I understand, I can visualize what life was like before and I tried to write that into some of the early chapters. So you could get a sense of pre war, you know, life for this family. But then I also had a very sort of chilling haunting experience at the same time. But we continued our trip through Czech Republic and Austria. I did not hike the Alps that Halina hiked over, but we looked at them. And then the following summer, we, we came back, and we took our son who was four at the time, Wyatt, and we did the Adriatic coast of Italy, which was sort of the last leg of the European Exodus, and was less research intense, but we did make a few important stops. And without giving too much away, there was a very important gathering in Bari at the train station. And so this is us walking up and down and being there in the on the platform and hearing the chirp of Italian and watching the trains come and go and imagining Mila there with little Felicia was very moving. So I'll end with a couple of passages, and I'm gonna for my amazing friends who this is like their second or third reading who love you. These are new, so something you haven't heard before. So this first passage is kind of exemplifies how I took a family story. And fictionalized it, so from Felicia and that first interview in 2008,
she had told me that when the family was confined to the ghetto, as the weeks and months passed, she realized at one point there were fewer and fewer children. It was unsafe for Felisa to be in the ghetto she was she spent weeks and weeks devising a plan to escape. And that plan involved sewing a coat to look like a German wife, who had come to the ghetto gates at the end of the day to meet their German guards, husbands, and she wanted to sell a coat so she could kind of blend in with the German wives and walk backwards out of the gates. So that's all I got. That's the story from police. Yeah, I knew there would need to be a lot of backstory. How did she find the material? What was it like to be sewing and I have some scenes where she and her mother are actually sewing that coat together? What was it like to leave her parents behind in the ghetto? So from Felicia is maybe four or five sentence description. This is the very end of that scene, that chapter that describes their escape. This is Mila's perspective told from her perspective, it's April of 1942. And they are they've they've made it from their apartment to the gates. And then in the meantime, they have the Jews were required to wear stars they've taken she's taken her star off in an attempt to blend in. So this is sort of the the moment of truth. Finally, Mila senses a structure overhead, there beneath the main entrance that arch to vehicle gate. A gust of wind lashes at their backs, and Mila reaches for her hat to keep it from blowing away. She tugs its brim over her brow and glances down at Felicia who was white in the face, but whose expression is markedly calm. Stay focus. Mila reminds herself you're so close counter steps one, two, they creep backward. Three, four. On her fifth step, Mila can see the outer walls of the entrance and the sign that reads danger of contagious diseases entry forbidden. She can hardly believe it. They've made it outside the ghetto walls. But these next few steps she realizes are the most important. This is the moment she'd replayed in her mind over and over again like a scene out of a movie until she convinced herself her plan could work. summoning the last ounce of her courage supply mula inhales sharply This is it. Come she whispers she swivels 180 degrees, pulling Felicia with her. And then with the ghetto behind them. They walk right left slowly, not too fast. Mila thanks resisting the instinct to run. Right, left right left she tries to pull her shoulders back to carry her chin high but her heart is a jackhammer, her stomach a ball of barbed wire. She waits for the shouts the gunshots. Instead, though all she can hear is the sound of their footfall. Felice has three steps for her to the heels of their shoes clicking lightly on the pavement of Lubelski Street, moving slightly faster now away from the guards and their wives away from the workshop and the filthy streets and the so called contagious diseases. Mila makes her first right onto room allow that regatta and they walk in silence for another six blocks before ducking into an empty alleyway. There in the shadows. Mila's heart begins to slow down The muscles in her neck loosen, and a moment. Once she's gathered herself, she'll make her way back towards Aska Street and her parents will building where she'll knock on the door of their neighbors and friends, the subjects and if they'll let her spend the night, tomorrow, she'll use her false ID to try to arrange travel to Warsaw. They are far from safe if they're caught, they'll be killed, but they've escaped the prison of the ghetto her plan. The first phase of it at least has worked you can do this we let tells herself, she glances behind her to be sure she hasn't been followed, and then stops and bends down a cup of palm around felici his cheek and presses her lips to her daughter's forehead. Good girl, she whispers Good girl. So as you can see, I added a lot of detail that wasn't passed down to me, but that I thought I tried so hard to put myself in Mueller's shoes. And imagine not just the scenery, but what did it feel like sound like what was going through her mind at that very moment. So that's one example of kind of my way of turning fact to fiction. And in the end, maybe and brought the story closer to the truth. And the way Felicia told it to me, you know, in that sort of distanced Black and White Way, and I'll read one more to you. And this is told from kynix perspective. Again, he's my grandfather's oldest brother, older brother. And so this was a mix this I didn't get this story passed down through relatives, but I read firsthand accounts of many of the soldiers who joined Anders as army X Siberian Gulag prisoners. And I read about how they were all involved in many of them. The Polish second
corps were involved in this battle of Monte Cassino, which I mentioned, which there had been three failed attempts in this battle. They're in Italy, Southern Italy. And for whatever reason, the Polish Army has been chosen to kind of lead the way to take the casino to get to the top of the mountain. And if they are able to win, this would pave the way to Allied victory. But I didn't know what Ganic what would he have been thinking and feeling like as he's going off into this battle, no one in the family had a very strong military instinct or perspective, I knew he didn't probably want to be there. Being in the army was his only choice, but now he's there. He's proud. He's scared. So this was a way for me to I had this picture of ganache with his wife, Herta. And I have one other picture of a bear that ended up joining the Polish second core somewhere in Iran along the way. And I was just so in love with this bear. He became a mascot for the army that I knew I wanted to combine these two and I had, I created a scene where ganache is about to get mobilized to fight in this battle, and he decides to write her to a letter. Ganache listens to the drum of raindrops on the A frame of his tent, thinking of the weekend in the mountains when he first laid eyes on hurtta He pictured himself in his white cable knit sweater in English tweed pants, hair to close by his side and our smart goose down ski jacket, her cheeks cheeks pink from the cold, her hair freshly washed and smelling of lavender. How surreal it felt now looking back at it as if you drempt it despite the rain he continues morale here is surprisingly high. Even woke Jack seems to be in good spirits, lumbering happily around camp in search of handouts. You should see how big he's grown. Private will check the only official four legged member of andrew's arm is a bear he was discovered in Iran as an orphaned cub Wilczek Polish first smiling warrior is now the unofficial mascot for the Polish second corps. He's traveled with the army from Iran through Iraq, Syria, Palestine and Egypt and finally to Italy. Along the way, he's learned to haul ammunition and to salute when greeted he enjoys a good boxing match, and he nods and approval when rewarded with a bottle of beer or a cigarette. Both of which he eagerly devours. Understandably so Wilczek is easily the most popular member of the Polish second core Ganic rolls onto his stomach read reads what he's written. Well his wife see through it. Harrington knows him well enough to sense when he's hiding something. He flips to the back of his book and retrieves a photo in it. haertperched on a low stone wall in Tel Aviv wears a new gray collared dress. He's standing beside her and his army attire, who remembers when auto took the picture Julia had had held to Josie a while auto counted to three and just before he snapped the picture, head to head looped her arm through kennix leaned into him and flipped her toe playfully like a school girl on a date. He misses her more than he knew was humanly possible. Josie too. I'm not sure when I'll be able to write next will be re stationed soon. I'll be in touch as soon as I can. Please don't worry. Of course harder will worry. Ganic thinks regretting his word choice. He's worried petrified, he choose the end of his pen, three failures, an army of ex prisoners, the odds aren't in the Polish second course favor. How are you? He concludes, how is a reply soon, I love you and miss you more than you can imagine yours Ganic. So in this case, I had those two photographs. And I had on my timeline, I knew where he was, I knew that it was raining a lot in Italy, and that he didn't bend the knees a frame tents. And there were a lot of other accounts from other survivors that I read, describing the weeks building up to this big battle. And so I took those, you know, those pieces and pull them together into that scene. And I think both of those are also kind of examples of how I tried to balance in the book, the lighter moments with the dark, you know, finding the balance between the treacherous, horrible things that were going around going on around this family with the sentiments of love with the music with the babies that were being born, and find the right sort of those tender moments to include amidst that uncertainty. So on that note, I'd love to answer any questions you might have. You have a question? Just raise your hand. I'll bring the mic to you. Anybody? Don't be shy. Don't be shy. Yeah. Okay.
Question 36:50

So when you start when you finish? Okay, how long did it take you from when you started to when you finish? And then when you wrote the book, when you actually sat down to write it? Did it take you?

Georgia Hunter 37:03

I mean, so it was published in 2017. And I set off in 2008, for my first interview, so nine years started to finish. And when I first go off on these interviews, often I'd come back and just dash out a scene or a chapter when it was fresh in my mind. So when I finally got my timeline, compute complete and realized I wanted to make some sort of manuscript out of it. I had like 21 off chapters, and I realized that wasn't going to work. I needed to write an outline and some chapter summaries, because as you can tell, the story follows a lot of people and over a lot of geography, it's five continents, seven years. So then the real writing came in probably like three or four years ago. And then the editing, couple years of editing. So yeah, long process, almost a decade. Worth it. So it was worth it every minute and never felt like a chore. It just always felt like something I needed to do. I was so grateful to be able to do it. Yeah.

Question 38:06

I'm curious about is it a quote from a member of the family? Or a general summary of your experience? Or Lucky is an interesting word.

Georgia Hunter 38:22

It is no. And if I asked my family the question, were they lucky? And it was always yes. But there was, there was always a plan. They were always trying to stay one step ahead. And often, I think, personally that the luck came in where they were making those last minute split second decisions. That could have turned out either way. And I think that's where the luck came in. But they always had a plan. And yes, the title is a direct quote from Felicia, from that family reunion. When we were sitting around the table and my mother's generation fleeces generation, they were telling stories at the end of the night, she spoke up and said, You know, it's really a miracle that we are all here today. We shouldn't all be here we were the lucky ones. So obviously, that stayed with me. Yeah. What happened that your grandfather did not marry the first fiance. Oh, you're gonna have to read the book? No. I will. The way Philly Elisa described it was there were too many fireworks. So they were both very strong personalities. And I had to read a little bit into it. So I actually she gave me a stack of letters that she wrote home to one of her best friends in Czechoslovakia. And I kind of draw from those letters, a little bit of a sense of self centeredness. But she, I don't think was probably able to relate to my grandfather having lost touch with his family in a way that he needed. And I so part of that is fictional. eyes and part of it is, is I could read through her letters. And there were a few mentions of my grandfather kind of being in a downplays a sad place. So, in the book, I kind of used that as a as a reason. Her mother also really was anti my grandfather until they broke up, and then she was best friends with him. But no, I think that they and they ended on a positive note, I was a little nervous to sit with her because, you know, I didn't really know how it ended.
And thankfully, they were friends after and, and even with my grandmother, because my grandma, they he met my grandmother in Brazil, and they all worked together in the city for in Rio for a while. Oh, sorry, you

**Question 40:42**

have a couple a couple of things. I'm curious about the balance between fiction and nonfiction? I mean, this almost sounds more like what some people might call creative nonfiction than than a novel. And so like, how much of it? How would you balance those? And did you actually make up things that had nothing to do with with any basis in historical facts? So that's one part. And then the other part is maybe just a little bit nosy. But somebody who's done some family research, all this sounds very, the trips, the translation sounds very pricey. And so I'm wondering if you got any advances or grants or anything like that, to support it?

**Georgia Hunter 41:19**

Yeah. So really, I'd say 99% of the narrative who was where and when is based on truth. So I was lucky in that way. I had my plot, I had my, my bones, the bones of the story. So the fictionalization came in more when I had to take a very sort of distant explanation. Even in the show interviews, family members talking about their own experiences, they would talk about it with such stoicism in in a way that felt very black and white. Well, then, we were in the I was crawling across the field on my hands and knees and I heard a gunshot but I kept going because I had to reach Jacob or, and then my mother stuffed me into a mattress and dropped me out of the window of the ghetto. It told like that when you stop and you put yourself in the shoes of those people in that moment, there's a lot more going on. There's the you know, there's fear, there's anxiety, there's sweat dripping down your brow, there's a smell of the earth under you. So I wanted to include all those sensory details. And that's the piece that was fictionalized. Occasionally, I would create a secondary character. For example, when Mila my grandfather's older sister decides to put Felicia in a convent. I didn't know how she'd heard about the convent. So I had that question mark. And then there was a scene that I wanted to include that was passed down a story where Mila was working for a German family, under her false papers for false ID and one at one point, the wife of this house, accused her of being Jewish and actually threw a vase at her and hit her in the head. So I knew those two things that the Lisa went off to a convent, she got hit in the head, so I decided to create a seamstress. And the seamstress was the link. So I said one day, the seamstress overheard Mila Urmila mentioned that she needed a place for her daughter, the seamstress was also Jewish working with false papers. And the seamstress told tells me about the convent. Mila, who's also taking care of this German child goes to visit the seamstress, and then comes back and the child tells his mom, we went to this address, the mom gets mad throws the vase accuses her of being dead. So there were occasions like that where I felt like I needed a link from one event to the next. And I would create a secondary character. But very few of those occasions. And yes, it was very pricey. The travel however, I always stayed with family everywhere I went, which was amazing. And often we would just that was our summer vacation. So instead of you know, dipping our toes in the sand and Mexico, we trekked across Eastern Europe, we kind of sacrificed our our big summer vacations for that purpose. And I give my husband so much credit for that, because I didn't want to impose that on him necessarily. But he said, No, we're
doing this, we're gonna go and it was it was amazing. I don't regret any of it. But I certainly think that if anybody's interested in doing the same thing, it's worth looking for a grant because I think it could be that could be a great idea and accessible. Yeah.

**Question 44:17**

My question is about your heritage, your Jewish heritage and going through your family traditions and ancestry. Did producing this book give you a deeper sense of what it was to be and what it is to be as a part of your heritage in the Jewish faith tradition?

**Georgia Hunter 44:42**

It did. I do think it did, because clearly, I had no idea that piece of me existed. And interestingly, I just did 23andme and I'm a third Jewish, not a quarter, so a third Ashkenazi Jew. So I definitely feel closer to that piece of my heritage having spent so much Much time researching the traditions. And I have to say I do, you know, it may not be so much the faith that I feel as connected to because it wasn't brought up with that faith, it's more of those traits that I think were passed down, kind of quietly through my grandfather, that resourcefulness, that, you know, ability to think, well, there's not really anything out there, I can't do if I want to do it, I'm gonna write a book, it might take nine years, I'm gonna do it. You fall down, you dust yourself off and get back up. Right, Keith? You know, so I think it was those, those traits. And I just, and I see them now. So clearly, in the family, and in my kids, my mom and her siblings, and then and my kids. And that's really special. And it's just been, like the feedback I've gotten from also other family. It's interesting. My grandfather was the only sibling who didn't keep the Jewish faith. Everyone else in the family today is still Jewish. So it's a little ironic, I think that that I'm the one that chose to do this. Write this book. But maybe there's a reason for that.

**Question 46:14**

You said your your grandfather never spoke of it. Did you find that the European cousins, or their parents more free with the stories was this sort of an oral history from their parents or just hearsay.

**Georgia Hunter 46:28**

So yeah, so my grandfather did didn't speak as much about it. And he ended up in the states he married my grandmother was a Presbyterian from South Carolina, not that she wouldn't have raised the kids Jewish or been open to discussing, you know, that piece of his heritage. But he landed also in a small town in Massachusetts, where there were no poles, New Jews, no Jews, and he just wanted to assimilate and put that piece behind him. The other family lived together. So a lot of them many generations under one roof, great grandparents, grandparents, children, so they were in Brazil. And I think just thanks to that alone, being together in the same house in the same city, I think the stories and the traditions and the religion, it was easier for them. But there was still you know, it wasn't like it was a big piece of everybody's upbringing, I kind of had to pull bits and pieces of stories out of everybody, everybody kind of
knew little bits of their own story. And then I kind of had to pull them all together. But it wasn't just it just I just don't think it was a piece of their past that any of them dwelled on any of the siblings.

**Question 47:31**

Anyone else? You kind of answered this question, but my I'm Polish descent. And when I asked my grandfather, if he had any interest going back to Poland, he said absolutely not that this was his country. And yet, you know, his family, friends, family, immediate family were there. So my question would, I got the sense that your grandfather had no desire to go back to the old country whatsoever, and that his assimilation was here in the United States. And that's why my grandfather was interested, my son wants to go visit Poland, and go to San Domingo, in Krakow know where they were from?

**Georgia Hunter 48:13**

Have you been back? No,

**Question 48:15**

I haven't. But but I'm being pulled there. And the other question I had is that I noticed with the Polish family, if depending on which side of Poland you were on, there was intense feelings against the Russians, if you're on that side. And if you're on the Germany side, have intense feelings against Germans and I didn't. Did you see the same thing?

**Georgia Hunter 48:34**

Yeah, yeah. And but the family ended up on both sides. So some were under the Russian side, some are on the German side. And the feelings were intense, for sure. But I back to your first point, I think it's sort of interesting how often it skips a generation. So there are a lot of grandchildren of survivors doing what I'm doing. And maybe it's because there's enough distance and maybe it's because that generation of survivors are fewer and fewer. And those stories once their loss or loss forevers but they're an author. There are many, many authors writing about their grandparents experiences and I just think that's an interesting phenomenon. I do encourage you to go back Do you have family in Krakow if your family in Krakow definitely or had that probably is one of my favorite cities I was so surprised to find no but also and also do the concentration camps because I think that's also so important I want to make that like required travel for every everybody but I definitely think it was it was very grounding experience to go back and very it's it's surreal in a way to walk in your ancestors footsteps, but also it's just I can't even describe the feeling. You just kind of feel like, it makes sense. You're there and you look around, you're like, Wow, this is where I came from. And it's really, really neat.

**Question 49:57**

I have a question. I just Want to go back to the idea of lucky again? Over here? Oh? On the idea
I have a question. I just want to go back to the idea or lucky again? Over here? Oh? On the idea of lucky again, it struck me as I read it, you know, their family had assets that other people didn't have. They were wealthier, seemed educated. How much do you think that played into the fact that they survived?

Georgia Hunter  50:22
I think it was certainly played a role. They were, education was paramount in the household, they spoke multiple languages. And then they were able to learn languages easily. So when they ended up on the Russian side, or the German side, they could pick up those languages with which also, I think, saved their lives. And my father, my mother tells me that my grandfather, actually at one point, when she was also made to speak French around the dinner table, he said, you know, French saved my life one day, way back when he kind of left it at that, but I do think the ability to speak those languages, and yes, they were able to, like, hide away some of their silver and porcelain and use that trade it use it for bribes. So they were very lucky with that way. And before the war. They were assimilated also into the polish. It was like the poles in the Jews, you know, there was the Jewish Quarter, but they lived in an area which was more mixed. So they went to school with poles they were, you know, they didn't go to the only the Jewish schools. So I think that also maybe helped them in a way they had connections and friends and neighbors who they could rely on for help.

Question  51:27
It just kind of struck me that things that seem like oh, my gosh, is so terrible that this is happening. In the end, it saved them. So for example, because they had a nicer apartment, they were sent to sent away to what you know, and when other people got to I can't remember the word. What's it called? The ghetto. Yeah. When they got to the ghetto, they were sent there first. So they had an apartment to go into. But people who came in later, didn't have a place and those are the people who were killed first. So what seemed to be something that was awful in the beginning, was a blessing in disguise, perhaps. And it seemed like there were a lot of those kind of things that happen that not a blessing, but maybe blessed more than the people who were didn't have a home and were were murdered. You know. So.

Stuart Goldberg  52:23
Thank you very much.