

Memoir vs. Memoir

Married almost 60 years, Harry and Naomi Zaslow each put their life stories on paper. But revisiting the past, as families are discovering, can be a wrenching experience.

By **JEFFREY ZASLOW**

June 26, 2006; Page R1

My mother recently finished writing a book about her life, and in it, she sums up her past three years with my father. "I felt," she writes, "like I was living with his mistress."

The mistress is my father's 663-page memoir. It has been an obsessive project for him, and my mother worries that he's stuck in the years 1944 and 1945, when he was an American soldier in Europe. He writes far more about his World War II experiences than he does about his 60 years with my mom, and that's painful for her. She doesn't appear in his book until page 500.

She took to writing her life story as a way to reconsider her reflections, as my father was lost in his. They wrote their dueling memoirs on opposite sides of their house in Florida, my dad in longhand, my mom on her computer. Her book makes it clear that she's proud of my father, she still loves him madly, but she also resents that all-consuming book of his.

Older people these days are often encouraged to put their lives on paper. There's been a boom in adult-education classes on autobiographical writing. Web sites and software programs are proliferating to help people store their memories for posterity. And through advances in print-on-demand publishing, people can now have their lives bound into books without paying large fees.

Memoir writing is being celebrated as a cathartic, enlightening, late-in-life exercise that leaves a precious legacy. That's all true. Less talked about, however, are the risks: Memoirs can lead to misunderstandings in marriages, and friction within families. While writing, people need to be aware of the emotional land mines.

Yes, both my dad and mom, at ages 81 and 76, respectively, have produced beautifully written, heartfelt documents that their offspring will cherish. But the process took a toll on their marriage. Memoir-writing experts say this is common.

"Women focus memoirs on their relationships and families. Men focus on their careers or their military service," says Paula Stahel, who teaches "life writing" to senior-citizen groups in Tampa, Fla. "It doesn't mean a husband doesn't care about his family, or that his wife doesn't care about his war experiences. When people realize this, they can get over the hurt."

After hundreds of hours of writing, my parents, Harry and Naomi Zaslow, eventually developed a measure of understanding about how they each chose to chronicle their lives. My mother realized that my dad had never completely come to grips with what he lived through during the war -- the comrades he lost, the scenes he witnessed as a concentration-camp liberator. My father, meanwhile, saw in my mother's book the courage and perseverance that carried her through life: She grew up poor, lost her brother, a U.S. airman, during World War II, and like many women in the 1950s, allowed career dreams to wane so she could focus on her family.

A Compulsion to Share

For decades, my dad hardly spoke about the combat horrors he saw at ages 19 and 20. But while writing his book, these memories became his constant topic of conversation. That was hard for my mom, especially given the subject matter: the war, the Holocaust. And she couldn't help but be reminded of the brother she still misses.

At the same time, she was saddened to think that the life she and my dad built together seemed secondary to him. Why would he put 16 photos of Adolf Hitler in his autobiography, and just six of her? (He says he wants his life story to be a warning to future generations about tyranny and genocide. To that end, he also has been speaking lately in schools.)



THROUGH THE YEARS (clockwise from top left) Tillie Zaslow, in braids, stands beside her father, Hyman, circa 1912 (both later wrote memoirs); Harry and Naomi Zaslow's wedding in 1948; Naomi as a child actress; the couple today, and in the late 1940s

While writing, my dad often declined to go to the movies or dinner with my mom, or out with friends. His book became his mission. My mother wrote her memoir almost in self-defense, as an activity to fill her time when he wasn't there for her.

My dad might be an extreme example, but a lot of older adults feel his same impulses -- a compulsion to share what they've learned, to leave a permanent mark. "In gerontology, we believe reminiscence is a normal developmental stage," says Mary O'Brien Tyrrell, a former nurse who runs Memoirs Inc., a St. Paul, Minn., service that, for \$3,000, will ghostwrite and publish a senior's memoir. "Just as a 1-year-old gets up and walks, a person of 75 or 80 starts to look back and

reframe."

That process, though, needs ground rules, says P.J. Cherrin, publisher of Memoir Press, based in suburban Detroit. For fees ranging from \$10,000 to \$80,000, Mr. Cherrin will interview an older person at a set time every week for six months, then craft his or her story into a memoir. "It's sort of 'Tuesdays With Morrie' for hire," he says.

As Mr. Cherrin sees it, a memoir has many purposes: to convert experiences into wisdom, to pass on values, to find forgiveness, to bring people from the past back to life, to seek connections between experiences that seemed unrelated. A memoir shouldn't be a tool for revenge or mudslinging. Nor should it be an exercise in self-pity. "You should be in tune with the older, wiser person you have become," he says. "Don't be a neutral reporter about your life. Memoir writing is not journalism."

My mother's book shows a nice understanding of this. She arrived in the U.S. from Canada at age 2, and her family struggled through the Depression, at times on welfare. As she describes her plucky childhood in Philadelphia, I pictured "Angela's Ashes" crossed with a Shirley Temple movie. She writes of how grateful she was when a charity left a Thanksgiving meal at her family's doorstep. Later, she helped support her parents as a child actress on radio shows. She writes of meeting Ethel Merman and singing for Eddie Cantor. By age 12, she was a USO performer.



My mom's hero was her older brother, Manny, whose B-17 bomber was shot down by German fighters over the Baltic Sea in April 1944. Other U.S. airmen in the sky that day saw parachutes open, and my mother and her family spent the rest of the war "in hushed hope that he would be found and returned to us," she writes. He was declared dead after the war ended.



REVISITING THE PAST

Selected groups and businesses offering insights into the memoir-writing process or help in crafting an autobiography

- **Association of Personal Historians Inc.** (personalhistorians.org⁷)

Nonprofit trade organization suggests personal historians to oversee your memoir, or preserve your life story on audiotape or DVD.

- **Center for Autobiographic Studies** (storyhelp.com⁸)

Provides links to memoir-writing self-help groups nationwide.

- **Memoir Press** (memoirpress.com⁹)

A "'Tuesdays With Morrie' for Hire": Weekly interviews that result in a book about your life. Fees range from \$10,000 to \$80,000.

- **Memoirs Inc.** (memoirsinc.com¹⁰)

Turns your life story into hardcover books, with photos, for fees starting at \$3,000.

- **Memories & Memoirs** (memoriesandmemoirs.com¹¹)

Sponsors workshops and retreats to help you find the theme in your memoir; offers tips on how to write a memoir without making your family angry or anxious.

- **Visiting With Words** (visitingwithwords.com¹²)

After recording your story on tape, an "interviewing companion" writes, edits and publishes an oral history. Books average between 60 and 100 pages.

Source: WSJ reporting

When my three siblings and I were young, my mother rarely spoke about her brother. She and my grandparents found it too painful to mention him. By bringing him back to life in her book, my mother overcomes that silence. "I cry now for my brother," she writes, "for a life that might have been, for a wife and children he might have loved. In losing him, I know the purpose was noble, the cause was just. But the sorrow, until this very moment, is overwhelming."

Evocative Details

My parents are actually continuing a tradition of late-in-life autobiography begun by my dad's grandfather. Born in 1865 in a Russian village, he wrote his memoir, in Yiddish, just before he died in 1949. Like many memoirists of his era, he focused on the human capacity for enduring and surviving.

He explained how peasants killed his brother during a pogrom against Jews. He described the battered old ship he and his son took to America in 1905, and the sailors who got into a terrible fight, damaging and almost sinking the vessel. Once he arrived, he worked in a Philadelphia shipyard as part of a seven-man crew. His six co-workers all died in on-the-job accidents. In 1913, he returned to Russia and brought the rest of his family to the U.S., including my grandmother, Tillie, then 9 years old.



Ray Bartkus

Seventy-eight years later, in 1991, my grandmother wrote her own memoir. She worried that some revelations would upset her offspring, but found the courage to share certain secrets, including the fact that she had an abortion during the Depression. At the time, she already had two children, and thought another would be a burden. The abortionist botched the job, and my grandmother, bleeding and feverish, was hospitalized for 10 days. She told doctors she hadn't had an illegal abortion, but they knew better. Regrets about the abortion remained with her, never talked about, until she wrote her memoir. She died in 1997.

My great-grandfather's handwritten memoir exists on fragile, lined paper; I have a photocopy. My grandmother's photo-filled memoir was bound at a local printer and given out to her family.

My parents' books will look far more professional, thanks to print-on-demand technology. Working through AuthorHouse, a self-publishing company based in Bloomington, Ind., my mom and dad plan to have about 100 copies of their books printed for friends and family. My father will also donate his memoir to Holocaust and veterans groups. AuthorHouse publishes books for fees starting at less than \$1,000. The combined costs of my parents' two projects will be less than \$5,000.

Regardless of what the finished packages look like, the beauty in memoirs is usually found in the simplest details. Both my parents have a gift for this, but I was struck by the difference in their approaches.

My mother's book offers observations meant to resonate in the smallest family circle. I was moved by her description of how "gloriously blue" the sky was on the day I was born in 1958. Who else on earth would remember that, or share it with me?

My father, on the other hand, uses details to put a human mark on the global historical record. He feels a moral obligation to describe every horrific thing he saw on the day he entered the Dachau concentration camp. He tells of cattle cars stuffed with mangled bodies, of corpses still burning in crematorium ovens, of just-liberated inmates beating Nazi guards. But even as he was overwhelmed by the horrors, he writes, he noticed that spring flowers in the camp were beginning to bud.

Later that day, someone handed him a sandwich. He was sick to his stomach from all he had seen, he writes. "But I knew that if I were to survive the remaining weeks of the war, I would have to fortify my mind and body. I forced myself to eat the sandwich."

My father, who spent his working life as a real-estate broker, was able to reconstruct his experiences because my grandmother saved 400 letters he wrote home during the war. The letters had been bundled up, unseen for decades, before my dad began his book project.

My father's memoir is filled with foreboding moments. On a family vacation when he was 2 years old, he wandered away to play on a nearby train track. His mother realized where he was just as a train of boxcars screeched by. In a panic, she ran to the tracks. When the train finally passed, she saw my dad, safely on the other side. (She felt that same sense of dread during World War II, when there were reports that my dad's unit was captured and shot by the Germans. It took two months before she received news that he was safe.)

War Stories

Early in my father's book, he describes the ancient Civil War veterans who visited his fifth-grade class in 1935. Eight years later, my dad was drafted, and his grandfather, who had been a Russian soldier in the 1880s, took him aside to offer advice on using a bayonet. "Thrust forward," the old man said. "But after a quick jab, jump backward to avoid getting killed by your opponent." He gave my dad a prayer, pressed between steel plates, to carry through the war in his breast pocket.

My dad writes about his last day in basic training, when a lieutenant addressed the troops. "Men, we are going overseas," the officer said. "Many of us will return. Some of us will not." (That lieutenant ended up dying a year later in a German mine field.)

The meat of my dad's book traces his unit's trek through Europe, and his own reflections. He observes that the bodies of American soldiers were quickly removed from battlefields, so their saddened comrades wouldn't lose the will to fight. He writes empathetically of the times his unit captured German soldiers, many as young as 14 or 15. The boys would plead not to be killed, their hands shaking as they pulled out photos of their mothers and sisters.

It's been well documented that men of my father's generation returned from the war and rarely talked about it. Many now have an urge to write memoirs because they need to make sense of their lives, says Kenneth Doka, gerontology professor at the College of New Rochelle, in New Rochelle, N.Y. "They wonder: 'Did my life matter?'"

I once interviewed Tom Brokaw, author of "The Greatest Generation," and after my article ran, scores of World War II vets sent me manuscripts of their memoirs to pass on to him. I assume many of their wives, like my mother, were proud of what these men accomplished, but also a bit overwhelmed by their late-in-life fixations.

Debbi Olley Murphy runs an oral-history service in Narberth, Pa. For about \$1,200, she'll interview seniors and craft their memoirs. She finds that for many veterans, "once they start talking about the war, they really can't stop." She gently steers them toward the present. "I ask, 'Well, what happened when you came back from the war? Tell me how you met your wife.' I try to be subtle."

People writing memoirs on their own, like my dad, have no one to guide and edit them, or to tease out the significance of certain experiences. There's a greater risk of hurt feelings within their families.

Most memoirs don't have an index in the back, but if they did, Dr. Doka says, an author's loved ones would use it to find their names and ask this question: "Is my perception of my

role in your life equivalent to how you see it?" It can be painful, he says, if your spouse has a starring role in your memoir but you're a bit player in his. "It almost invalidates your life."

Luckily, when my mom does finally show up in my dad's book, she's the girl of his dreams, the source of his passion, the woman he most admires. I wasn't surprised as I read that. Growing up, I saw their courtship as almost cinematic in its romance. Their near-breakups before getting married were legendary, always followed by the realization that they couldn't live without each other. Reading both their books, however, I discovered bumps along the way I hadn't known about.

One occurred on the day they met, in the summer of 1946 on the beach in Atlantic City, N.J. My mother writes: "We were splashing in the waves, having fun, when a big wave overtook us. Harry overtook me, or the situation, and grabbed me inappropriately." My mother was outraged, my father apologetic. In his book, however, he insists he was trying to save her from the ocean currents. As he explains it: "I was forced to grab at her bust line so that she would not tumble into the huge wave."

Whatever the story, my mom says there are lessons in her memoir for her grandchildren. "A girl is like a clean, white dish towel," she writes, quoting her mother. "Any boy who puts his hands on her leaves a mark."

A good family memoir is "a compass young people can use to find their own path," says author Bill Zimmerman, who wrote "My Life: An Open Book," a guidebook for memoirists. He suggests that they ask themselves questions such as: "What dream did I help another person realize?" "What family ritual do I hope will be carried on?"

Unlike my father's book, so wedded to the war, my mother's takes in the fullness of her life, and the lessons she learned as a woman of her time. She has sweet memories of working in the early days of television. In 1948, she was hired to do on-camera posing, acting and dancing for a crew learning to use TV cameras. By 1950, she was working as a writer and actress for Philadelphia's NBC affiliate, sitting at a desk next to the comic Ernie Kovacs. One hit show she helped develop was a simplistic forerunner to reality television: A camera followed an adorable baby girl as she played in a playpen.

As a reward for my mother's good work, the station gave her and my father their first TV, and put an antenna on their roof. However, when my mom became pregnant in 1951 with her first child, her bosses felt betrayed, assuming she'd forsake her career for motherhood. They made her quit, and sent a crew to pick up the TV. (The crew couldn't disconnect the antenna, so they left that.)

Three years later, my mom was asked to host the "Romper Room" children's TV show in Philadelphia. By then she had two kids, and felt she had to be home for them. She didn't take the job. "My decision," she writes, "was influenced by the tenor of the times."

In the 1970s, once her kids were older, my mom took a job as public-relations director for a suburban Philadelphia school district. Through that job, she embraced cable television in its infancy, creating "General High School," a cable soap opera. My mom scripted the show with moral messages, used actors from the community, and received attention from the national media, which called the show a groundbreaking use of local cable.

Bridging the Generations

I'd like my three daughters -- ages 16, 14 and 10 -- to read both of my parents' memoirs. They've leafed through early drafts, and read a bit here and there, but they feel no great urgency. That's common, I'm told, and some older people find it hurtful. "More kids today know how Brad and Angelina met than know how their parents or grandparents met," says Ms. Stahel, the Tampa writing teacher who also has a business helping seniors craft personal histories. "But grandchildren often get interested in reading these memoirs when they have children of their own. That's when they really understand they're part of a continuum."

Now that their books are completed, my parents are entering a new era. In my mother's memoir, she admits that she feared my dad would never finish writing his book "and would never again regard me as one of the most important things in his life."

But my mother ends her book on a note of hope. She reprints the lengthy letters she and my father wrote to each other this past March, on their 58th wedding anniversary. "I have loved you in every phase of our lives, and with every fiber of my being," my mother wrote. My father's letter assured her that she has always been his "treasure," and that "as we travel into the unknown...my love for you has not changed."

As their son, I am grateful that they remain together, and that their lives are a book still being written.

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