

Journeys We're On

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I was on the phone with my cousin Leonard, a retired draftsman living on a lake in Florida. I told him I was writing a memoir about our grandfather, Steve Szostak, and wanted to ask a few questions.

"Oh, man," he groaned, as if I were crazy. "But go ahead, fire away."

I fired away. He made listening noises, and then, suddenly, "Look, this is old stuff. Come down to Florida. I'll take you fishing, tell you a good story. I've got all this material I've wanted to put in a book for years. I just need somebody to, you know, fix up the sentences."

During his rebellious youth, Leonard dropped out of high school and hitchhiked from Detroit to Sunset Boulevard, to sit in Hollywood's fabled Schwab's Drug Store: where fetching, sixteen-year-old Judy Turner, he'd heard, was spotted sipping a soda and became movie star Lana Turner. My starry-eyed cousin sat at that same fountain for a week hoping a brand new luminous ball of gas would be discovered; but he ran out of soda money and had to hitchhike home. Fix up the sentences in that kind of story, he meant.

Almost everyone I contacted who had known Steve Szostak longer than I had—other cousins, aunts, my mother—at some point would turn fanciful, veering off, circling, correcting, coming abruptly to a hard place and starting over.

I was well into *My Grandfather's Book* when I realized that that was what I was really writing about: story, narrative, the accumulation of detail and color, the human back-and-forth we use to help us describe the journeys we're on, getting a chance at seeing who or what we might be while we're at it. Fixing up the sentences.

Are we telling the truth? Can we ever, as the famous line goes, tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? It's not likely. Once upon a time an immigrant Pole in his teens, trained as a blacksmith, arrived in America. Arrived with the twentieth century. He worked for many years in a Detroit foundry, moonlighted as a butcher, made and sold sausage, saved some money. Then in 1927 he bought a northern Michigan farm. One hundred and eighty pretty acres. He'd also married and fathered eleven children, nine of whom reached maturity. He continued to work hard—especially during the Great Depression—and died one morning in his apple orchard clutching a book to his chest. His wife Nelly, a pious woman of good heart, slipped that book under his arm just before Mr. Savage, the undertaker, closed the coffin. That book was the beginning of his—our—story.

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