

17th October 1962 – and other facts

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No, we have to be quiet. Because Mummy's asleep. Are you not sleepy? No? No. No, we don't have toys in here. That, that's not a toy. That's a letter opener, it's very precious. Your Grandma made it when she was at school. Then she died, yes. No, she didn't give it to me, Grandma gave it to me. My grandmother your great grandmother – sort of - well it's complicated... I'll explain when you're bigger. Oh, she was... she ... wore glasses, strange long dresses and she gave funny kisses where you could feel her teeth... No, I don't think I can do one of those kisses. She kissed me and started to tell me about my mother making the letter opener but it was all in Dutch and I didn't understand so Mum translated...

She translated grandma's story about the letter opener but she didn't translate the facts about grandma. My Grandmother turned out to be my step-grandmother and my real Grandmother had died years before when my mother was a small child. No one explained that to me – not out of malice but just because they assumed I must already know. I was the youngest of four. It's easy for facts to get lost in the jumble of everyday life.

It's hard anyway to know which facts are important and which ones you need to pass on to your children.

This show is my attempt to find out.

I wish someone would have explained about my grandmother/step-grandmother, but no one said anything. But I do have this.

Letter opener.

It's very precious to me. My Mum made this and she gave it to her stepmother – that's a family fact. This is my mother.



And this is Werner Heisenberg



No relation. In 1927 he presented the Uncertainty Principle – it is not possible to measure simultaneously certain pairs of observables – such as position and momentum, energy and time –

For if you measure one of these the act of establishing that as a certain fact alters the answer for the other.

You can in fact know only one fact at a time.

This is my mother in about 1968. I love this photograph. It looks to me as though she is giving an order to Walton Hassel and Port the grocers in Brookman's Park. She's chatting with the grocers, maybe flirting a little, charming them with her... exuberance. ... it's from the period of half memories, when Mum wore print dresses and stretchy trousers which she called slacks... and this picture cuts through all that and just brings it back – Mum in the telephone chair...

I am living the dream. I am in Edinburgh. I have sold my first play. My wife is appearing in Me and My Girl at the Edinburgh Playhouse.

We rent a flat. She goes to work – I am writing the next play. In the mornings we go to coffee bars and shops. In the afternoon and evening she goes to work and I sit down in the flat and write.

It's good – it's cosmopolitan – we feel we are doing what we do – what we want to do. We can live anywhere. We are footloose and free. Untied down by history, untied down by commitment. We are separate from time - young and powerful. We will live forever. She dances. I write. It is good.

We eat out a lot – the restaurant knows my wife – we are glamorous – it's like Hello Dolly - the waiters abandon their other clients and I bask in her celebrity – I feel like Christopher Isherwood. In the day I write and go to coffee bars, I feel like Ernest Hemmingway.

One morning we are in bed and my mobile rings. I have to get out of bed to answer it. It's my father. "Your mother is dead." I tell my wife. She lifts the covers. I get back into bed and she comforts me.

I don't say anything.

Is that something I should be telling my daughter?



Or does she need facts.

This is my father in about 1933. He was born in 1917 during a Zeppelin raid. He went to school at Whitgift in Croydon. Then to France and on to an international school in Switzerland. He started working for his father then the war broke out and he was sent to Woolwich, Wales, Charing Cross Station, India, South Africa, Aberdeen and Kent. While in Kent he shot down a V1 – a doodle bug...



At about that time my mother was in The Hague, at school...

The Germans were using The Hague as the launch site for V2 rockets (the early ballistic missile developed by Werner von Braun). Sometimes the rockets went to London, sometimes they crashed in the North Sea sometimes they just went straight up and came straight down again - my mother said.

One day when she came back from school she found the house they lived in half destroyed "the back half of the house was simply gone and upstairs, my bed was hanging over the edge" she said. The V2 had gone straight up and come straight down.

Or was that her friend's house...

In an attempt to stop the V2's the Americans sent a crew of 22 Mitchell Bombers to bomb the launch site but they got the coordinates wrong. Instead of bombing the unpopulated northwest corner of the wood they bombed the heavily populated south east. An entire district burst into flames.

Several days later the RAF came back and bombed the right side of the estate and the launch site was not used again.

My mother was proud of the RAF. It's why she emigrated to England after the war...

She'd been in the Hague because my Grandfather sent her there to attend the Montessori School. Grandpa stayed in Rotterdam...

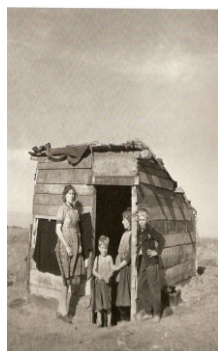
I am in Rotterdam. I don't know how old. Arriving at my Grandfather's house for the first time. The buildings are tall and strange. We knock on the door, my grandfather opens the door, tall, white hair cut short - embrosse he calls it - spikey. He picks me up and hurries me through to his dark living room – the television is on – the cabinet for the TV is this big – the screen is this big and on it speaking Dutch (which I don't understand) is a clown. My Grandfather holds me against his legs laughing and we watch the clown. I sense his love but...

I don't say anything.



Grandpa Hessel. Mum said when the war broke out The Hitler Youth came to call insisting that all metal objects be taken to the town square by the following morning to be melted down for German armaments. As soon as they left Grandpa gathered all the metal in the house and took it into the garden. He got a spade and started digging a large hole. Standing in the hole up to his waist and wondering if it was big enough he could just see a pair of eyes under the fence – his neighbour stood in his own hole a spade in his hands. Failing to donate anything to the Hitler Youth was considered dangerous but no one wanted to be seen to collaborate. Therefor Grandpa chose his donation with care. He took a small pewter cup, he got on his bike and cycled to the town square holding the cup in front of him. He walked through the square and tossed the tiny cup onto the growing pile of railings and tea trays – he cycled home.

That's one of Mum's funny stories of the war she had lots of funny stories of the war – so much so that when I finally saw photographs of occupied Holland they weren't at all what I expected.





These photos were actually all taken by my mother's brother – Uncle Kryn.



This is him with a camera hidden in a briefcase – he also used to hide them in paper bags – he joined the Dutch resistance when the war broke out and helped smuggle pilots back to England through France – I discovered after his death that he was arrested by the Gestapo and condemned to be shot although he was released finally through lack of evidence.

He also took pictures for the Dutch resistance - out of a desire to document what he saw – record the facts and pass on the truth.



His photos aren't humorous but they come from the same facts that my mother had...

Photos don't lie – Kryn documented the truth...



Actually this photograph of the allies dropping supplies to the Dutch is two photographs – Kryn superimposed the aeroplane dropping supplies ,



He cropped this picture so that all the background was dark and the boy's spoon would be the only glint of light – it's how he told the story ...

“What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning.” Werner Heisenberg *Physics and Philosophy* 1963 (17th October)

Depends where your standing what kind of photograph you take – what story you tell – what - facts you choose to pass on.

My family – that generation... the facts of history, the fact of the Second World War changes the stories of their lives. It's like a magnet which bends their stories. You can't measure them without it...

Public memories and private memories merge – the tale grows in the telling and time passes and Mum's experience of Grandpa in the garden becomes a polished tale, his cycle ride into the square a heroic saga...

My father born in Zeppelin raid – shooting down a doodle bug...

Measuring one fact alters the result for the other...



This is an observation photograph taken from an American U2 plane on 17th October 1962 it shows the ballistic missile sites on Cuba that sparked the famous Cuban missile crisis. These missiles were a direct descendent of Werner Von Braun's V2. On the same day 17th October 1962 Werner Von Braun was writing a memo at NASA finessing the plans for the best way of landing the lunar module



on the moon— quite an achievement...

and I was being born... The world on the brink of nuclear war while I am being born – does that colour my life – is that like being born in a Zeppelin raid?

But actually the reason I know about Cuba is that I googled my birthday and came up with that photograph – the reason I know my father was born in a Zeppelin raid, however, is that my Great Auntie Win told me she remembered running for the doctor in the dark with the bombs falling all around her. And the reason I remembered her story is not the grand history but the idea that Auntie Win would run anywhere!

My tales of life and loss are small - insignificant, unconnected to world events ...

I think I'm six – so it's about 1968. I'm brushing my teeth in the bathroom – the yellow bathroom. It has frosted glass and the frosting is made up of a pattern of little sailing ships. When the window is open on a Spring day – and it is a spring day – you can smell the garden – cut grass – mingled with Ajax scouring powder - it's fresh and cool. But it's dark outside and my sister says that Grandpa is dead. I brush my teeth.

I don't say anything.



This is Hessel Taconis who died while I was brushing my teeth. I have all kinds of stories about him from my mother – the Hitler Youth and the pewter cup, the billeted soldiers and the rotten porridge, the tennis set sent for from England in 1896...



That's grandpa... apparently... but I remember this...



I remember a big television and a Dutch clown... I remember brushing my teeth.

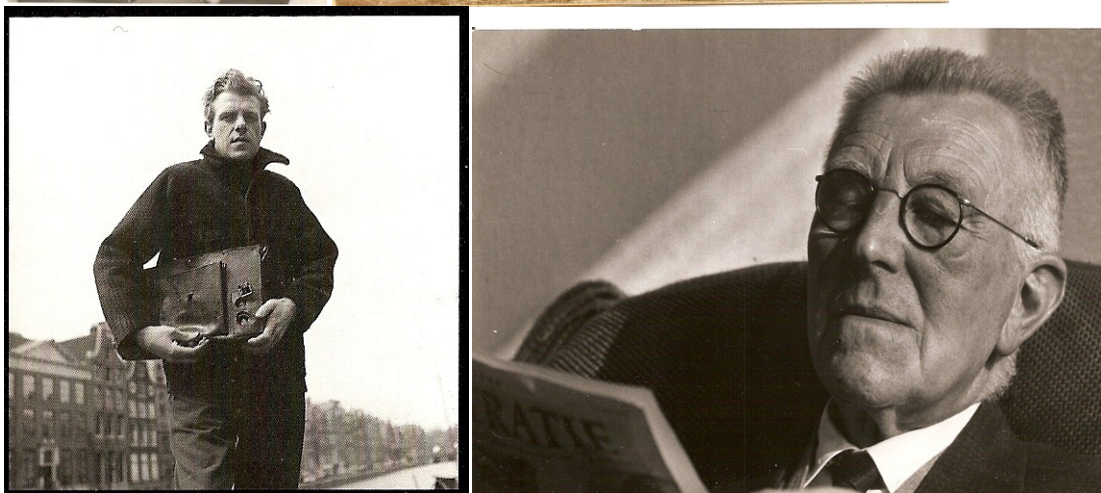
Which of these facts define him? Which of them define me? Which should I pass on to my daughters...

Is it more important to know that your great-grandmother gave funny kisses or that she wasn't your great-grandmother? The facts are nothing the questions we ask are something and the stories we tell...

Or maybe it's the things between the stories that matter... I have this

The letter opener.

I have this.



I have all these stories.

It's four O'clock in the morning. I am sitting on the spare bed. My daughter is in my arms. I am exhausted. She is crying. She is exhausted. I hold my daughter tight, rocking back and forth. We are there for a long time. Finally she stops crying. She doesn't want to sleep. She is asking questions and I am telling her about her grandmother. How she would have loved her. I wonder why she had to miss her. Why they couldn't have met. I want to share this with her but she wants to know what a letter opener is. I tell her about it. Finally, she is curling up on the bed and she is sleeping. I am lying down next to her muttering stories about my mother, about my father, about my grandmother, about zeppelin's and V2's and funny kisses, how they all died – and how they would have loved her. It's five o'clock in the morning. I am lying next to my daughter on the spare bed. I know I have to die. But it will be alright.