

THE FLIP

My Grandmother and Me

By Diana Raab

When I was 6 years old, my grandmother taught me how to type on a black Remington typewriter perched on the vanity in her bedroom, which was right beside mine. It was a hot summer Saturday morning when she invited me into her room.

"Have a seat," she said, pointing to her vanity chair. "I'm going to teach you how to type. This is a handy skill for a girl to have, plus you never know what kind of stories you'll have to tell one day."

She stood behind me, her reflection in the mirror—dark roots framing her bleached-blond hair, and her glowing smile revealing the rather large space between her two front teeth. I wasn't surprised to learn years later that as a young woman she'd won beauty contests in her native Vienna.

Grandma took my right hand and positioned it on the home keys, carefully placing one finger at a time on each letter, repeating the same gesture with my left hand. "This is the position your fingers should be in. When you become a good typist, you won't have to look at the letters. Let's see if we can type your name."

With my left middle finger, she had me press on the "D." Then we moved to the right middle finger and moved up a row to type an "I." Then my left pinkie pressed the "A," a tricky maneuver for a novice typist. She then instructed me to move my right thumb down to the bottom row to type an "N." Then my left pinkie typed the final "A." I glanced up at the paper to see the results of my efforts, and then proudly looked up at my grandmother's face in the mirror.

"You see—you did it!" she exclaimed, squeezing my shoulders. "Like anything in life, the more you practice, the better you'll get. You must work hard to get results; you'll learn that soon enough, my love." Needless to say, I wrote my first short story on that typewriter.

Four years later I found my grandmother dead in that same room. As was the case on most weekends, on this Labor Day weekend my parents were working in their general-merchandise store in Brooklyn, and my grandmother Regina stayed at home to look after me. It was ten o'clock in the morning when I knocked

on her bedroom door. I cracked the door open and got a whiff of her perfume, *Soir de Paris*. She lay beneath her checkered Scandinavian blanket, and in the window beside her, the sheer white curtains swayed back and forth. On her chest was a Graham Greene novel, *The End of the Affair*, and on her headboard was an open bottle of prescription pills.

"Grandma, Grandma!" I exclaimed, skipping through her room and landing at her bedside. "Can I please go swimming in Cindy's pool? I'll be back for lunch; I promise." She still didn't answer. With a child's intuition, I sensed that something was seriously wrong. I ran down the hall to my parents' room and picked up the pink dial phone to call them at work.

"Mom, I think there's something wrong with Grandma!" I blurted out. "She's not answering when I talk to her. Please come home. I'm scared," I said with a deep sense of urgency.

My parents rushed up the creaky wooden stairwell to Grandma's room followed by two uniformed paramedics. I waited at the bottom of the stairs, and moments later, they descended with my grandmother strapped to a stretcher. Her eyes were closed, and she looked peaceful. The ambulance was parked right outside the front door of our small two-story shingled home. The paramedics placed the stretcher in the back door of the vehicle. I never saw my grandmother again, but the image of that moment, and the one where she taught me how to type, will be forever etched in my memory.

My parents never talked much about how my grandmother died, but I sensed that it was a choice she'd made. When I was a teenager, I found her death certificate, which stated: "Suicide" as the cause of her death. Since that day, I've been obsessed with not only trying to figure out why she took her life, but with why others might also choose suicide.

Many years after grandma died, my mother stumbled upon my grandmother's journal, where she chronicled her childhood growing up in Poland. I read about how at the age of 12, she'd been orphaned during World War



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1. Her parents died of cholera. When my grandmother was 13, she and her younger sister emigrated to Vienna to be near their older brother. The girls moved into an orphanage, and while attending school, my grandmother earned her keep by working at a local bank.

As I read more about her life, I realized what a gift she left me. I also realized how connected to her I was. As a child, I was an extension of my grandmother, and even more so as an adult after her passing. She was the person who planted the seeds for my life as a writer not only because she was devoted to the written word herself—evidenced by her daily journaling and her propensity for leaving notes on the kitchen table—but also because she taught me how to type and the importance of storytelling.

I'll always be grateful to my grandmother for giving me the gift of learning, reading and writing, and for teaching me how to type on that Remington typewriter. I went back and forth between writing stories in my journal and typing them on that Remington, much in the same way I do today—alternating from keyboard to journal.

In 2007, my memoir, "Regina's Closet: Finding My Grandmother's Secret Journal," was published. I dedicated it to my grandmother, who was responsible for the person I'd become and for inspiring my lifelong passion for the written word. So with heartfelt love, I send my deepest gratitude to my grandmother, Regina. 📖

Diana Raab, PhD is a memoirist, poet, essayist, blogger, and speaker. She presents workshops in writing for healing and transformation. She has a PhD in Psychology with a concentration in Transpersonal Psychology with a research focus on the healing and transformative powers of memoir writing. Diana has been writing since an early age. As an only child of two immigrant parents, she spent a lot of time crafting letters and chronicling her life in a journal. She's an award-winning author of 10 books, more than 1,000 articles and poems, and editor of two anthologies. Raab's two memoirs are "Regina's Closet: Finding My Grandmother's Secret Journal" and "Healing With Words: A Writer's Cancer Journey." She has 4 poetry collections, including "Lust."

