The Force of Things: A Marriage in War and Peace

May 29, 2013
1 hour, 07 minutes, 56 seconds

Speakers: Rachel Klein and Alexander Stille

Transcribed by: Rachel E Lieu

Holocaust Living History Workshop
UC San Diego Library Digital Collections
https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb66917147

Time	Transcription
00:00	[The Library / UC San Diego]
00:05	Rachel Klein: Hello, I'm Rachel Klein from the History Department and it's a great pleasure for me to be introducing Alexander Stille the San Paolo Professor of International Journalism at Columbia University. Sandro has contributed to an array of distinguished publications including, *The New York Times, The New Yorker, The Atlantic Monthly, la Republica*, uh, *The Boston Globe, The Toronto Globe and Mail, The Nation,* and the list goes on. He is also the author of five books, *Benevolence and Betrayal: Five Italian Jewish Families Under Fascism*, uh, published in 1992, followed by *Excellent Cadavers: The Mafia and the Death of the First Italian Republic*, published in 1995, and *The Future of the Past*, published in 2002. Then came the most wonderfully titled book T*he Sack of Rome: How a Beautiful European Country with a Fabled History and a Storied Culture Was Taken Over by a Man Named Silvio Berlusconi*. For those works, he won a number of significant awards including the Los Angeles Times Book Award for the best work of history, The San Francisco Chronicle Critics Choice Award, and the Alicia Patterson Foundation Award for Journalism.
01:38	Rachel Klein: Equally impressive in my view is the fact that his fourth book provoked several personal lawsuits against him by Silvio Berlusconi himself. Today he will be talking about his recently published fifth book, a memoir, and history of his family entitled *The Force of Things*. To engage with the lives of one's parents the way he does is a real act of courage, but the book is more than a personal history, um, and more even than a really fantastic read. It's also a reflection on the times in which his parents lived, and the cultural worlds that they inhabited. For me, the book has special meaning because my mother and Sandro's mother were very close friends during the last two decades of their lives, and the book - to my great delight - includes some witty and characteristically, uh, perceptive observations about their friendship. And I guess on that note, Alexander Stille.
03:00	Alexander Stille: Okay, I'm going to use a different mic. Can you hear me in the back? Okay, very good. Um, it is an incredible pleasure to be here for a lot of reasons, uh, but one very big one is, um, because of Rachel [unclear] here. And so it has a lot of sentimental meaning to me, and I see them far too seldom. And it's also a pleasure to talk about this rather, for me, unusual different book. I'll try to give you, I'm going to sort of do something that's more of a reading than a talk because I think the words that I spend a lot of time uh preparing are likely to be more incisive than the ones I can extemporize to you. But, um, at the same time doing a reading is always a tricky business because, um, with many books, um, if you read just from the - the smart thing to do to get a sense of narrative flow is to read a chapter of the book, but then, um, you don't get a sense of the scope of it

and the whole thing. In the case of this book, if I were to read from one chapter it's a little bit like the story of a blind man who is trying to get an idea of what an elephant looks like, and he, uh, you know attaches himself to the tail and in first and [unclear] rest of the elephant would look like. So, in this case, that would be a problem, um, because the book, uh, so I'll give you a little bit of a sense of the architecture of this book. It, um, traces, um, two lives, two families across the 20th century - my two families - of my, of my mother and father, which start in very different places, one in Tsarist Russia and you get a little bit of a sense of these characters from that part of the story, and the other from the American Midwest.

05:05 Alexander Stille: This is my mother's family. Uh, this photograph was supposedly made as an entry to a contest for the handsomest family in the state of New York, where they were living at the time. This is the family legend, and they supposedly won, uh, at least for something like the Ivory Soap Company. In the event, uh, but this is a much more American story and, um, the book essentially follows these two families through, uh, the first half of the 20th century, Russian Revolution, Fascism, World War II - in my father's case - and my mother growing up in Ithaka, Chicago. And until mid-century, when the two main characters namely my parents meet at a party for Truman Capote's first book in New York and my mother enters the party with her first husband and leaves it with her second one, in dramatic fashion. So the two stories, it kind of begins as a kind of a braid of these two different stories which alternate chapters and then become a single story about halfway through it. And a lot of it is about, I think - if there's a larger significance to the book - it's about this moment of cross-pollination in American life in which substantial numbers of highly educated Europeans were forced out of Europe by Nazism, Fascism, and other threats, um, and, uh, wound up in this country, took refuge in this country, and were welcomed here. And, uh, my parents' story is a kind of microcosm of that larger story. And it's also an intimate portrait of a marriage and I argue - I had reasons to - that their marriage was a kind of clash of civilization. It wasn't just a clash of two personalities and two people. Uh, they came from very different worlds, as I tried to indicate from uh my mother's -

07:25 Alexander Stille: I'll give you a little bit. I include these photos because I think they're sort of fun, and interesting, and like they express something in the mood of times that are no longer with us. This is my, my mother's mother and father right after they met. My grandfather is the one here. He clearly has a sort of captivate the canary grin, having just won prize which was my grandmother. And this was the suitor for her hand, who sits a little bit apart seemingly recognizing with good nature in his defeat. And this is, instead, the Moscow branch of the family. My other, my paternal grandparents, and my grandfather here, who was kind of a black sheep of his family. I think of this photograph as being the Beau Brummell of Yellow Russia photograph because you see the ascot, and the stiff collar, the pince-nez, the very fancy walking stick, the handkerchief out of the thing, the fancy hat, and interestingly um what I imagine is a Russian script, but it might be Polish

or German or it could be Lithuanian because this was taken in Vilnius. So, um, and this is the other grandfather, um, uh, and my grandmother. Part of the book is also, um - particularly on my mother's side - um, a story about marriage, and about the life of women before feminism, which I found enormously interesting to find out about, and to investigate, and to write about. It's again as part of these two worlds. This is my grandfather's. Um, so this is what you didn't, you lucked out on not having to wear to your high school, um, a class picture uh if you were born after uh 1900, uh that's my grandfather back there.

09:28 Alexander Stille: And there's actually a rather striking resemblance to me, which I find is kind of strange. And this instead is my father's, um, grade school class in Italy. That's my father right there. That one of the things I find interesting about this class is it's a little bit of a portrait of authority in Fascist Italy because, you know, the three forms of authority, the priest over there in the black, the Fascist official in the middle, and the professor with the mustache - who looks actually rather like the, um, uh, the Head of the Minister of Education at the time, Giovanni Gentile. Um, so and this is my dentist grandfather, the one from Russia, who is the one in the middle there. I love this photograph because of the beard of the dental technician over here. It's very characteristic of Fascist Italy. It's the beard that a man named Italo Balbo, who is a very famous hero of Fascist Italy an aviator, and political, uh, figure, uh, made very popular. So people were running around with Italo Balbo beards at that time. Um, this was them. They moved to Naples, my grandfather. My father's family moved to Naples before they settled in Rome, and, um, uh, they moved to Rome. That's my mother as a little girl. And then we get to the uh, couple.

10:59 Alexander Stille: So I'll read a little bit from, uh, I like this picture because of the cow. So, um, I'll read a little bit, uh, now that you've gotten acquainted with the dramatis personae. [reading from his book] Most of her life my mother made lists. Laundry lists, grocery lists, lists of errands, of Scrabble scores, of vices and virtues, New Year's Eve resolutions, and household repairs. For a number of years, early in her marriage, she kept careful accounts of her monthly expenses in various bound ledger books: *groceries $9.25, dry cleaning $1.75, maid $12, liquor $3.00, cigarettes $1.50, Lucy's jacket $10.00.* These ledger books are mostly blank. Good intentions tended to run out by mid-month. My father, during these years, kept her on a pretty tight leash, with a monthly allowance she considered entirely unreasonable. They would often argue about money, along with other things. Perhaps in order to mollify my father and justify herself, she would begin to keep careful accounts, nickel by nickel, dollar by dollar. But these efforts at household economy would soon fall by the wayside, as she would revert to her generous, free-spending ways. Throughout her life, she woke early, long before everyone else in the house, sat in bed, and drew up lists. After her death, I found many of them, by her bedside table, by the phone downstairs, tucked into drawers.

Unlike her monthly budget, she followed through on these rigorously, crossing out errand after errand as the day went by.

12:32 Alexander Stille: And to kind of move ahead, not to, uh, the, um, at the end of this chapter I tell the story of uh my father, who was the opposite in matters of neatness, uh, and precision to her. Um, [he] managed to light their apartment on fire by, um, he lived amid, uh, newspapers and would knock out his pipe into a waste basket full of newspaper clippings. Uh, this is definitely pre-digital, and so he didn't notice that he had lit the place on fire until a fireman literally broke through the front door with an ax. Uh, he was talking on the phone to a newspaper in Milan. And, uh, anyway, at the end of this my mother, um, uh, sends him off to a party to get him out of the way to continue the cleanup, and then goes out to dinner and compiles a list that says insurance company: window repair, carpenter, and locksmith, plastic bags, cleaning service, divorce, question mark.

13:40 Alexander Stille: And so that is the end of this opening section and then I'll read from the kind of parallel section that's about my father called “Names, Dates, and Places”. [reading from his book] My father died, as he lived, surrounded by newspapers. They piled up like snowbanks in a blizzard in a world where it snowed newsprint every day. While my mother was alive, she had tried to confine his mess to his office bedroom, but after she died, the newspapers gradually crept down the stairs and began taking over the apartment like tropical vegetation reclaiming land that had been painstakingly cleared, the fragile progress of civilization returning to jungle. As the months passed, piles of newspapers took over the downstairs coffee table, colonized the surfaces of the living room cabinets, spread out and made themselves comfortable on the two living room sofas, drifted to the dining room, first covering one end of the table and then half the table, so when you joined my father for dinner, you would sit at one end and stare at a growing stack of papers. If you suggested moving them (even temporarily) he became agitated. The chairs at that end were gradually converted into newspaper storage devices. My father had always slept in the bed in his office, but the bed was swallowed up by papers and he moved down the hall to what had been my mother’s bedroom, an inner sanctum that had always been kept inviolate of any clutter—and the newspapers and books and magazines invariably followed. When he failed to answer the doorbell and we had to call the fire department to break down the door to his house, we found him in his pajamas (as he had lived and worked for most of his life) on my mother’s bed, newspapers and books on the bedside table and a few scattered on the bed next to his body. His heart had given out before the newspapers could complete their work and bury him.

15:26 Alexander Stille: [continued, reading from his book] A refugee of two countries—first Russia and then Italy—whose family had been forced to flee with only what they could carry, my father could not bring himself to throw anything out. His closet was

a kind of rest home for retired clothing: shoes that had curled in half with age, whose leather was hard and cracked and brittle; ties with irremovable, sweaters and shirts frayed almost to rags. There were strange and wildly improbable items—purple suede chukka boots, a camel's hair Nehru jacket, a debonair sailor's cap—that were impossible to imagine on my father, a short and stout European intellectual with thick black glasses, without laughing out loud. Clearly, they represented fashion fads that had mercifully passed or moments of temporary consumer insanity that had been quickly regretted and consigned to oblivion but never thrown out. There were suits that were literally six sizes too big or too small, but nothing—not all my mother's entreaties—could convince my father to give them to the Salvation Army or throw them out.

16:30 Alexander Stille: [continued, reading from his book] Among the few papers my father did make an effort to conserve was a single half-piece of cheap, yellowing typing paper containing just two lines:
Ilya Kamenetzki, May 19, 1884, Kreutzburg, Latvia
Sara Altschuler, April 17, 1886, Moscow, Russia.
These were his parents' names, the dates and places of their birth in my father's own handwriting. Why would he have needed to copy out such basic information about his parents - surely everyone knows his own parents' names and birthdates by heart - and keep it tucked away in a cardboard shoebox in the bottom of a closet with the deeds to our house and other important legal and financial documents? The seemingly simple fixing of names and dates and places was a highly complex matter for Jews of my father's and his parents' generations, who were almost invariably born in one country with one name and died in another under another name - often with multiple passages and mutations in between. Perhaps the most notable thing about the piece of paper my father kept in the shoebox is that one of its principal facts is wrong. My grandfather was not born in Kreutzburg, Latvia; he was (as far as we know) born in Mir, a town near the Russian-Polish border in what is now Belorussia. But when Mussolini allied himself with Hitler and passed antisemitic laws in 1938, and my father's family was forced to flee - leave Italy and get into the United States - he refashioned his identity as a Latvian.

18:01 Alexander Stille: [continued, reading from his book] At the time, the American government was working hard to limit immigration - it had adopted a strict quota system specifying how many people it would admit from each country. My grandfather had been born as a Russian subject, but the town he had grown up in had been assigned to Poland in World War I and the Polish quota was massively oversubscribed. The Latvian quota, however, was still open: after all, Latvia had existed for only a heartbeat. It was created in 1920 and would be occupied by the Nazis in 1941. Stuck between the hammer and the anvil, Hitler's Germany to the west, and Stalin's Russia to the east, many real Latvians found it difficult to emigrate, leaving room for an imaginary Latvian, my grandfather. Like many of my

grandfather's fictions, the name Stille was invented during the Fascist period at the time of Mussolini's racial laws. One of the many provisions of these laws was that Jews were no longer allowed to publish in Italian newspapers. At the time, my father was a university student and had the opportunity to write for a magazine, *Oggi*, which was as close to being independent as a magazine could be under Fascism. But, being Jewish, he needed to write under an assumed name.

19:17 Alexander Stille: [continued, reading from his book] My father ended up writing a column, together with his best friend, Giaime Pintor, under the name Ugo Stille. Stille means silence in German, and it seemed a good name for a pseudonym. They wrote separate stories on alternate weeks but using the same name, which suited the fact that they had become inseparable friends. My father left for the United States in 1941, and Giaime, who was not Jewish, remained behind. When resistance to Nazism was organized in 1943, Giaime used Pintor as his nome di Battaglia, his partisan code name, and died in an early resistance action. My father - both to honor his friend and because he had become known writing under his assumed name - made Stille his legal name, becoming in effect Mr. Silence. Thus, he always published under the name Ugo Stille and became, under American law, Michael Ugo Stille. Although adopting the name Stille was an act of remembering his bond with Giaime, it was also, at the same time, a way of erasing important parts of his past and identity. Kamenetzki, the name under which he had been born and left Russia, the name under which his family had been persecuted in Italy, was gone. Stille, as a name, is hard to place. To some degree, I suspect, it was an act of camouflage and self-invention.

20:35 Alexander Stille: And one of the themes of the book is, is about the whole question of identity - Jewish identity in particular - and the hiding of that identity, as we'll see as we look a little bit further on. [reading from his book] How these two very different people came together and, more incredibly, how they stayed together was perhaps the central mystery of my early life. My parents were opposites in almost all ways, not only in matters of neatness. My mother loved vegetables; my father hated them - unless they were deep-fried breaded zucchini (an honorary carbohydrate, essentially French fries masquerading as a vegetable) - and considered the appearance of broccoli or Brussels sprouts at our family table a personal affront, to which he reacted with fury. My mother hated arguments; my father started them. My mother almost never raised her voice; my father could shout and keep on conducting an entire argument at full volume like a tenor singing his way through an opera. My mother liked eating by candlelight; my father didn't trust restaurants with candlelight—what were they trying to hide? He insisted on turning up all the lights as if he were performing surgery when he ate - he wanted to see what he was eating. My mother loved flowers; my father considered them a useless waste of money. My mother was extremely decisive; my father agonized over every decision and then immediately regretted whatever decision he had taken. At restaurants, she never took more than thirty seconds to order and

never sent anything back. My father would change his order and then change it back again without giving a thought to whether he was inconveniencing the cook or the waiter. My father was - my mother was a big tipper; my father tipped so stingily that one of us would often linger behind and leave a few more dollars on the table.

22:17 Alexander Stille: Um, the, uh, part of the, as I said, the um, uh, for me - I didn't want to write a kind of naval gazing personal memoir, and so I um try to kind of embed these characters who are my parents, as well as my grandparents, into history. And so I see these kind of personal clashes as representing something more. I think my father was very much of a in some ways a typical product of what it meant to be a Jew growing up between World War I and World War II. He had a very deep pessimistic view of humanity. He used to say people are beasts and he had seen a lot of bestiality, where my mother was a product of the optimistic New Deal, where she felt that with time and education, everything would get better and better, people would seek light and do the right thing, and poverty, and racial hatred, and national-international conflict would dwindle away with the increased light of reason. Uh, a kind of interesting um, moment in which this clash of civilizations, the kind of moment where it would become evident, my mother um, was out doing the grocery shopping and had her wallet stolen from her purse. [She] uh had come home sheepishly without groceries, without a wallet, to explain to my father. Of course, he began to berate her saying she was a born mark because she wasn't sufficiently suspicious of humanity. And um, and then a couple of hours later the doorbell rang and the cab driver turned up and he had found her wallet in the back of his cab. Resolutely, the pickpocket had taken the wallet taken the money, and jumped into a cab taking the money left the wallet and this guy was kindly returning a lot for the credit cards and the driver's license of all of that. My mother, for my mother this was the confirmation that that humanity was essentially good and my father and but then she wanted to give him a tip and she hadn't she had no money so she convinced my father to part from 20 dollars to give him uh something for his trouble. My father very reluctantly parted with this, partly because he felt the guy was probably in on the job and actually came to their apartment to see if there wasn’t something more. [unclear]

24:49 Alexander Stille: As I mentioned, one of the things that interested me a lot - as a narrative challenge - in writing the book, my father's story had more obvious drama to it that would be easy to tell because it intersects with large historical events, as I mentioned earlier: the Russian Revolution, the Fascist Revolution, World War II, and so forth, the racial laws. Um, uh, but I ended up feeling that my mother's story effectively held its own, or her family's story, alongside of my father's, which I was happy about. But it was an interesting, posed an interesting question, about the life of women before feminism, and so I do a little bit of writing I’ll just read a little passage um from a section called “Unhistoric Acts”. [reading from his book]

What remains of someone who has led a purely private life? My mother did not leave her mark on the world, nor did she try to. Although she had always worked, she insisted she did it for the money. Unlike the men in her life, she did not see herself as building a career, like a monument, that would represent a lifetime of achievement. Her father's portrait hangs in the lobby of the University Of Chicago Law School, where he taught. My father left thousands of newspaper articles and is still remembered by millions of readers, and a photograph of him hangs on the walls of the Corriere della Sera - Italy's largest newspaper - along with portraits of other past editors, a little pantheon of Italian journalism. My mother's influence was limited to several dozen people whose lives she had touched in important ways. She had been a housewife, mother, sister, friend, and colleague. She had probably cooked 12,000 dinners over 40 years of marriage, washed hundreds of thousands of dishes, made tens of thousands of beds, and folded innumerable pairs of socks. Like the vast majority of people, she had led an anonymous life, not even imagining in her wildest private dreams that she might leave a legacy the rest of the world need concern itself with. She had not nursed unfulfilled literary or artistic ambitions, did not leave a sheaf of poems or the draft of an unfinished novel in a drawer for us to find after her death. If someone had asked her what her greatest achievement was, I expect she would have responded without hesitation: raising two children.

27:18 Alexander Stille: [continued, reading from his book] Gradually in the years after her death - I'm jumping forward a bit - I began collecting family papers, some found in the back of drawers, others in the attic of my grandparent’s farm in Michigan, where they had been left in the care of the mice but had been kept by the farmer who bought the place and passed them on to my uncle, who kindly gave them to me. As I put them into order and transcribed the tapes of my mother's and father's interviews, I began to learn a surprising amount about their lives, and something of the dense weave of their lived experience began to emerge. While it was personally satisfying to learn that far more remained of my mother's unhistoric life than I had imagined possible, could it have meaning for anyone other than those of us who knew her? Sifting through the thousands of pages of documents, which were like an enormous jigsaw puzzle, I began to regard my parents and their closest relations a bit like figures I had encountered in the archives doing historical research, many of whom were as obscure as my parents - or more. The famous and the unknown partake of the times in which they live. Whether we know it or not, we are born into history and pass through a stretch of it. The zeitgeist rubs off on us and leaves its telling signs like the carpet fibers at a crime scene. Like pollen in springtime, or the fine, almost invisible dust that has covered the furniture when you return home after a long absence, history attaches itself to everything, affects the way we think and talk, the possibilities we imagine for ourselves, the choices we make or fail to make. Our lives have meaning - above and beyond our individual qualities - because we are part of and express the times in which we live.

28:59 Alexander Stille: The uh, I'm going to jump ahead to um, a um, a chapter that deals with the uh, um, locating of the documents on my father's family, which is quite an adventurer. As you can see, it has to do with my father's sister um, and it's called the “The D’Annunzio Letter”. [reading from his book] Um one day my Aunt Lally [Myra Kamenetzki] - so excuse me, it begins - it all started with the D’Annunzio letter. One day my Aunt Lally, my father's sister, mentioned casually in passing that she had a letter written by the great Italian poet Gabriele D’Annunzio, addressed to her father - as if there was nothing unusual about my grandfather, a Russian Jewish dentist from the Shtetl of Mir having been in epistolary contact with the poet soldier of Italian Fascism. The content of the letter was even more surprising. It was a personal testimonial declaring that D’Annunzio Ilia Israel Kaminsky had provided important help to the D’Annunzio’s soldiers in 1919-1920 during the occupation of Fiume, a crucial event in the history of fascism.

30:19 Alexander Stille: For those of you not familiar with this particular corner of history, um, after World War I, at the Versailles Treaty, when the great powers of Europe were dividing up Europe, Italy had pushed for and failed to obtain parts of the coast of what's now Croatia, and was upset about it. And Gabriele D’Annunzio, who was both a poet, novelist, and charismatic nationalist, um, organized a group of former veterans who illegally occupied this city which had been assigned a special status as a free state. Uh, it had been a port in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and, um, this illegal act in a sense broke the peace that was supposed to be the peace that had ended all, all war. It was sort of the beginning of, it was like the Bunker Hill of the Fascist Revolution. It showed that force could pay and uh Mussolini took very careful note of this and imitated a lot of the choreography that D'Annunzio invented during the occupation of Fiume. And so discovering that my father and my grandfather could have been involved in this rather important historical episode was extremely intriguing.

31:46 Alexander Stille: I'll continue with the chapter, a little ahead. [reading from his book] The letter suggested an intriguing but wildly improbable scenario: that my Russian dentist grandfather had had some role in this troubling yet crucial historical episode in the beginning of the Fascist revolution that had earned the recognition of one of its founding fathers. I asked my father about it. He shrugged. He knew all about the letter but had never thought to mention it, as if it was simply a fixture of his childhood of no particular importance, like the color of the wallpaper in his parents' Rome apartment. The letter, in fact, had been a critically important document that had served the family as a kind of passe-partout, opening many doors in Fascist Italy. It had helped the family, which had been living in a kind of semi-legal limbo, to obtain Italian citizenship. They had used it to blunt the full effects of the racial laws and again to help them leave the country and get to America. How did your father end up in Fiume and what did he do there? I asked my father. Probably he wasn't there, he said with nonchalance, lying on his living room couch and chomping on a piece of Italian bread slathered with butter and

marmalade and spilling crumbs on his sweater vest. He then explained that one of my grandfather's dental patients was a well-known Italian actress named Elena Sangro, who was one of D'Annunzio's last mistresses. It was she who had gotten D'Annunzio to write the letter on my grandfather's behalf. Perhaps my grandfather had stopped in Fiume on the way to Italy, but more likely D'Annunzio's mistress would put him up to it in order to grease the wheels of the Fascist bureaucracy. This is unbelievable, I said to my father. So there are two possibilities, either that your father - a dentist from Yellow Russia - participated in the dawn of the Fascist Revolution or that he and Gabriele D'Annunzio - the unofficial poet laureate or Fascist Italy - perpetrated a fraud against the government by passing your father off as a patriotic hero for his non-existent contributions to the Fascist Revolution. Either way, it's incredible. I find that much less incredible than you do, my father said dryly. That's the way life under fascism was. He brushed the crumbs from his chest onto the couch and changed the subject.

33:50 Alexander Stille: So um, then moving ahead. Um the, um this document along with all of the family papers and photographs, all the photo - pretty much all the photographs on that side of the family - you see we're buried in this apartment. My aunt was a compulsive hoarder. A very charming but eccentric person and she had let no one into this apartment for more than 20 years and we soon found out why. It was a truly incredible - there was literally no space left in this apartment. It was a large New York apartment. The two bedrooms were completely uninhabitable and, um, she was sleeping in a cot in the living room, which two-thirds of the living room was occupied by an enormous mountain of wool. She liked to knit and she would buy, uh you know masses of balls of yarn whenever she saw them on sale and throw them. I don't know how else they got onto this enormous mountain of wool. And as we began clearing out the wool, I was throwing them out into bags, at a certain point I saw the outlines of a bicycle. My aunt said, oh my bicycle. So it was perfectly natural that there should be a bicycle underneath on that mountain of wool. Um, so that was um, um, uh, that was um, uh, her. Um, but the um, or not, actually because in fact, she was a quite complex and interesting person. But I describe that in this chapter and I then I'm just going to read a little bit because I think it again is suggestive of the larger stakes in this rather personal story.

35:51 Alexander Stille: She initially wouldn't let my mother into this apartment because she knew how different my mother was in matters of personal, um, domestic affairs. But then she eventually relented because she knew my mother was the person who could really clean this place up. So, um, I'm going to read a little bit from this part. [reading from his book] I don't think my aunt suspected the powerful passion that animated my mother's desire to take over the cleanup. My aunt's apartment was the physical manifestation of everything my mother could not stand about my father and his family. She came from and aspired to a world of light, order, and progress, The New Deal. This mess was the expression of the world of

darkness, despair, and irrational pain; the fearful holding on to everything as a bulwark against everything that was lost. It was a decidedly old deal. The detritus of a family. The first wave of stateless citizens would cross the major tragedies of 20th-century Europe, the Bolshevik Revolution, Fascist Revolution, racial laws, World War II. Um, this apartment was its terminus, the storage depot at the end of the line. To my mother, it was literally incomprehensible that my aunt could look at a faded old travel brochure for a place that she had never been, and would never go, or a piece of clothing that was not even fit to the salvation army and yet still not be sure whether to keep it or throw it out. As my mother surveyed the disaster of my aunt's apartment, she turned to Sarah, my girlfriend at the time - who shared my mother's neat and orderly habits, as well as her WASP [white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant] background, and said, I wouldn't blame you if you decided to opt out of this gene pool. While also being horrified by my aunt's habits, I understood them having the Kamenetzki disease inside me, albeit to a much lesser degree. This mess, well beyond my imagining, was yet oddly familiar. My father was cut from the same cloth as my aunt and might very well have ended up in an apartment like this, had he not been successful and prosperous enough to afford a cleaning lady and sane enough to have married someone who would keep his worst tendencies in check. I was better, but the instincts were the same. I felt the same twinge of regret and loss at getting rid of some object or paper, no matter how useless to which memory clung.

38:07 Alexander Stille: [continued, reading from his book] For all its madness, the Kamenetzki mess was still an intensely human expression, what Yeats called "the foul rag and bone shop of the heart." I suspected that in that chaos, among the expired lottery tickets, the old bills, the yellowing letters, the scraps of old clothing, the grime-stained souvenirs, in the nature of the disorder itself, the neglect and clinging nostalgia, were the secrets and the essence of a world of pain: the terror of revolution and war; the heartbreak and loss of exile; the persistent memories of faces and houses and landscapes never seen again; the insecurity of a marginal, guest people always fitting in and yet always on the brink of expulsion; the cunning and self-hatred of dissimulation; the small triumphs and fatigue of remaking a life and the fear of losing everything; fleeting joys against a background of oblivion and annihilation; the shame of being branded as a despised, hunted race. Perhaps in that maelstrom lay the sources of much in my father's difficult character: his fits of rage, his fear of change, his driving ambition and neurotic paralysis, his fear and suspicions, his deep reluctance to speak of himself or the past; the variables in the complex equation - a long string of losses and gains - of a man who reinvented himself, who left behind this mess and this household and its world of pain, denying his parents and his origins, only to create a new and more successful life but with its own mess and his own pain.

39:43 Alexander Stille: One of the themes, as I mentioned, of the book - this is the aunt in question. Um, one of her old friends is here today, I'm happy to see. That's her

in the middle, in her glory days with the Carlo Erba Pharmaceutical [Company] in Rome. And um, and this is a curious document that turned up in among all these papers in this crazy apartment, which is a um - it's actually Christmas, not Easter. I think I mislabeled that, but there were also Easter greetings. I found all this stuff that emerged in the course of doing my research that my grandparents had lied to their children about being Jewish when they moved to Italy. They felt rather insecure. They were living initially in a small town where there weren't other Jews that they were aware of and so they they didn't tell their kids that they were Jewish. They didn't tell anyone else they were Jewish, which is quite interesting. So then my father, after they moved to Rome in the early [19]30s - my father would have been about 12 - they told him and interestingly his reaction was anger. Um, it probably was not a happy discovery to discover that you were Jewish 1931 in Europe - the shadow of World War II hanging over. And um, and then he felt ashamed that he felt angry but then he refused to be bar mitzvahed, which his father wanted him to do. And then interestingly, as I discovered in a letter that I came upon of my mother to her mother, my father lied to her about being Jewish when they were courting, which is - I think - quite significant and interesting.

41:37 Alexander Stille: And so that, this question of origins, I think ends up being quite important and the fact that these two people - they said were drawn to each other because they were very, they were different. My mother married two, not one but two Jewish men. But I think they also were escaping their origins, and maybe sort of feel badly about where they were from. All of that ended up, I think, adding to the level of toxicity in their um, in their marriage. Um, I'll read a little bit from a passage toward the middle of the book. Middle chapters take you through the period in which they lived, and my father's family lived in Italy during the [19]20s and [19]30s. And this is from a chapter called "Death by Bureaucracy". [reading from his book] My father, my grandfather was clearly getting nervous. In the spring of 1938, Hitler had come to Rome and the Regime had begun to discuss the need for a new racial policy, but no laws had yet been passed. Nonetheless, he wrote to the Fascist Union of Doctors in Rome to make sure he was still a member in good standing and able to practice in Italy. He received a reassuring reply, this is to certify at the request of the interested party, the dentist Kamenetzki, Ilya, Son of Israel is enrolled in this Union of Dentists, allowed to practice in the province of Rome. The racial laws were passed a month later. He wrote again and received an identical reply in early 1939, racial laws are in full effect. So, in a strange Kafkaesque paradox, the racial laws that established that my grandfather was no longer an Italian citizen and lumped into a cat- into a dangerous inferior category of persons. Nonetheless, for the moment, he was still a member of the various Fascist professional organizations. Starting in 1938, the number of official documents that my grandfather kept suddenly went from a trickle to a steady stream as he tried to contend with the impact of the racial laws, and navigate the complications of leaving the country. The documents are written in the cold stiff and dull pros of bureaucracy, but laid out together and placed into order they tell a

rather chilling story - of increasing desperation, a gradual stripping away of rights and privileges, closing off of escape routes as Hitler's armies conquered more and more of Europe, the obtuse cutting of bureaucracies, setting up hurdle after hurdle, and the dogged determination and the resourcefulness of my grandfather in jumping over them. While I always took for granted that my father's family would have reached the United States - since that's what happened - reading over the papers it's very clear it almost didn't happen. It took three years of endless paper pushing and connection pulling. Even so, they got out just three months before it would have been too late.

44:34 Alexander Stille: One of the things that is curious um - this is a German woman who lived with my parents, who uh, my grandparents, who was curiously enough a Jewish a, a German National that is not Jewish, but living with this Jewish family, and helping them in every possible way. So she would speak with confidence that Germany would win the war, but at the same time she was dedicating herself to helping this Jewish family and when my grandparent's radio was confiscated at a certain point - as I said there was this kind of uh increases, decreasing of privileges and rights that happened in the late [19]30s early [19]40s. So they take away their radios and this woman marches into the police office and says, I want my radio back. And she said, well what do you, what are you doing living with a family of Jews? And she said I'll live with whom I please. Give me my radio back. So, um, and so when I asked my father, you know, how could it be that this woman was both kind of a patriotic German and yet living with this Jew, how she was helping them? He said it's the way life under fascism was.

45:41 Alexander Stille: And so um uh this is my friend my father's friend Giaime. And interestingly, this is um, my father's membership in the uh, the Fascist youth militia which he and his friend joined. That's some kind of amusing picture from that time. Um, and um, it was virtually obligatory to be a member of this university group and they joined this militia in order to get out of military service, but it meant that my father and his friend who was a great hero of Italian and fascism and learning when they did when they actually got to know one another they were learning the goose step in order to prepare the big parade for Hitler's arrival in Rome which they were both present at, which is kind of amazing. And then he gets sent back to Italy in the US [United States] Army during the war. And that's a Psychological Warfare Bureau Division, the unit that he was a part of. Um, I'll, maybe one passage and then um close it up.

47:00 Alexander Stille: Uh, from the section as they're leaving um Europe um called "Lisbon". [reading from his book] On the family's arrival in Lisbon, they had to pass through a passport control - a moment of terror. Even though my father's family had been able to assemble all the necessary papers, they also knew that some of them were not 100 percent Kosher. Their Portuguese visa, for example, had been made out by sympathetic diplomatic officials in Rome who had acted on their own

initiative, without having cleared everything with the central office back home. So the family waited with considerable anxiety wondering how closely the police official on duty would inspect their papers. I will never forget, my father told me, this Hungarian Jew, who was in front of us in line, an intelligent looking cultivated older man. The look on his face when they turned him away, sending him back to Hungary. The look that crossed his face was the knowledge of almost certain death. A vast majority of Hungarian Jews were rounded up and killed. A year earlier the great German Jewish writer Walter Benjamin committed suicide after being turned away from the Franco-Spanish border, which then reopened the next day. My father and his family watched this with trepidation as the same officials scrutinized their less-than-perfect papers - and then waved them through.

48:17 Alexander Stille: And then I, I learned this other story in a, in a kind of funny fashion and it goes um back to the issue of the way in which these large historical events I think are manifest in a very small daily, in daily life in a kind of granular way. At a certain point, I went to visit my father back when the New York bus and subway system was a dollar and you needed exact change to get on the bus. And so you've got, a dollar bill wouldn't work and so you needed four quarters. And I asked my father, do you have a dollar in quarters, and he gave it to me and I went off home. Then I saw him about a week later. He said, where's that dollar I gave you? And he was, by now, a man in his 60s and quite successful, and I started making fun of him for hounding me over a dollar. And he then told me this story when they were in Lisbon they managed to collect - by hook or by crook - before they left Rome all the US [United States] dollars they could get their hands on. And, uh, they had them in a kind of inconspicuous-looking brown paper bag, the kind of thing you'd get a sandwich in, and my grandfather had carelessly left this bag of dollars in a store that they had visited and they walked away. My father, a few blocks later, realized it and went running back to this store. Luckily the bag was still there and they had the dollars for the trip. But my father had said, after an experience like that, a dollar is never a dollar.

49:54 Alexander Stille: So, um, uh, let me see here. Um the, um giving just a tiny flavor of the other side of that. As I said I'm, it's hard to give a sense of the whole and I don't want to abuse your patience but I'll read a little bit from my mother's side of things and then close the talk. [reading from his book] Sometimes there's a wonderfully fresh and unpretentious exuberance in these letters. At the end of one, she writes simply, isn't spring wonderful? September 1936 when she was 17 she interrupts one passage and exclaims, honestly it's so much fun to be me. I'm enjoying everything so much. And then, [continues reading from his book] My mother seems to have passed these years in a kind of frenzy, so focused on boys and her social life there was room for very little else. I'm now waiting on - quoting from a letter - on pins and needles for Tommy to come. He'll be here any minute. I guess he called me up when I was at Ithaka, and he sounded exactly the same, only better. I'll write you when we get up to Ithaca, it's going to be swell. I went

down to White Plains this morning early and had my hair fixed. It looks nicer than I've ever seen it. I hope Tommy thinks so too. Well, I'll close now. I'm really too excited to know what's going on anyway. Write soon. Love to all, Betty p.s I rode down here on the train with a Cornell senior (male) (age 25) and he took me to uh, Grand Central in a cab and got me some magazines. He told me to call him up (at the Waldorf, s'il vous plait) if I came if I came in but I thought I'd better not. His name was Bob Lokmeyer (not Jewish) - in parenthesis - and he's much too sophisticated for me. He wanted to buy me a Dobb's hat because he thought it would be to, become me. Crazy?

51:45 Alexander Stille: And, uh, then I found in another letter she writes out her - she went to Cornell [University] - and um, uh, where her sorority mates made a ditty about her because she's extremely pretty and popular. [reading from his book] Betty Bogert, dark and fair, has a flame most debonair when he foams he moans and moans because she's never there.

52:09 Alexander Stille: And this um I'll then read a little bit from [reading from his book] Thinking of my mother in her breathless state waiting on pins and needles for her date to arrive, being swung back and forth by young men cutting in during dances, going to a party with one boy and then jumping from the second-floor fraternity to run off with another, I find myself thinking of one of the more moving cantos of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in which the tragic but damned lovers - portrayed as leaves being blown helter-skelter in the wind for eternity together but entirely in the grip of a force more powerful than themselves. My mother, like many women of her generation, channeled her ideals, ambitions, hopes, and dreams into the men of her life. It never really occurred to her that she might accomplish something important in her own right. Behind every great man is a great woman, went one of the favorite expressions of the day. Vera Nabakov (wife of Vladimir) gave up her own career as a writer in order to type manuscripts and do secretarial work to help support the author of *Pale Fire*, and *Lolita.* Of course my grandmother Lolita Bogert had done the same thing as well, at least initially. Their life was set up, as was the norm at the time, so that the wife would take care of all practical details of running with a household, cooking and cleaning, raising, and feeding, and schooling of the children, so that my grandfather could concentrate on his work during the day and be left in peace in the evenings. A good friend of my mother's explained to me once how she made sure to bathe and feed the children and have them ready for bed before her husband, who had an important job the United Nations, came home.

53:44 Alexander Stille: [continued, reading from his book] I have to contend with the Arabs and Israelis all day long. I don't want to have to deal with the children squabbling with one another, he would say. Of course, living through someone else's career is a dubious bargain, often fraught with resentment and disappointment. After all, the husband may have different ideas and goals in their

life. This was certainly the case with my grandmother, who was more of a liberal and champion of social causes, women, women's rights, civil rights, than her more scholarly, cautious, and skeptical law professor husband. Virtually all my mother's close friends fell into this category of women who had married smart, ambitious, interesting men, who either didn't work or worked on an occasional basis at jobs that were meant to supplement the family income, or keep them happily occupied as long as it didn't interfere that the husband's more important commitments. After all and all the important men in my mother's life fit into this category Clinton Rossiter, her, her college boyfriend. Her first husband Robert Wolf, my father, and of course her own father.

54:45 Alexander Stille: Um and then I'll just read a little something at the very end, and that will be the close of that, which is called "A Counter Narrative, or the Man Under the Rug". [reading from his book] The week I handed in the manuscript of this book, I had a terrible nightmare. A dead body turned up unexpectedly in my hotel room. I didn't kill this person, I thought, but everyone will think I did. I went outside to clear my head when I came back the body was gone. I breathed a huge sigh of relief and went about my business as if nothing had happened but a little knot in my stomach remained as if to say this can't be the end of the story. Dead bodies don't just appear and disappear. Then, as I was packing up to leave, I couldn't find my camera. Looking around noticed a lump in the rug thinking the camera might have somehow ended up under the carpet I lifted it to find a man's head or rather the front third of the man's head sawed off from the rest like a bloody mask. I put the rug back down in horror. Now they're definitely going to think I killed this person, I thought. What am I going to do? Perhaps I could just leave it under the rug and hope no one would notice. After a moment I realized this was ridiculous. The hotel cleaning staff would find it as soon as they vacuumed the room. What if I put it in a plastic bag and threw it out in the garbage somewhere it might never be found? But then I'd be committing a crime, destroying evidence and if it were traced to me I would look even guiltier. Perhaps that's what whoever left it there wanted me to do.

56:20 Alexander Stille: [continued, reading from his book] Either way, I was sunk. At this point, I woke up. I recognized the face of the man whose bloody head was under the rug. He was someone I barely knew, a friend of a friend. His presence seemed quite random until I suddenly remembered something. The man's wife was an author who had written a book based on his family and his father who had committed suicide. Then after the wife's book, novel - the wife's novel appeared, his mother committed suicide. My dream was clearly a dream of guilt and anxiety about writing a family memoir, guilt about pillaging the lives of the dead, and anxiety about harming the living. After all, writing about my parents wasn't something of a body snatcher. I hadn't killed them. That is true, but wasn't I to some degree trafficking among the dead? The relief and apparent ease after the disappearance of the body felt a bit like my state of mind while working on the

book. Since the book remained unpublished, I worked calmly but with a hint of anxiety knowing that the day of reckoning was somewhere ahead. I felt I had treated my parents fairly as I could, but would my parents friends, and relatives feel that I had betrayed their memories? Certainly, I had portrayed them differently than they would have portrayed themselves, but my parents were dead and their story was also mine. That's where I'll close. If anyone has any questions I'm happy to take a few. Yes.

57:50 Speaker 1: You had mentioned that your father had kept secret that he was Jewish, you didn't elaborate on your mother's response, whether she was angry.

58:00 Alexander Stille: Well, it's interesting because she reacted in this letter, she expresses anger and disappointment that he would hide such a fact from her, and that he would think that would matter to her. After all, she'd been married to a Jewish man in her first marriage, but um it wasn't quite that simple. My father had some reasons to be anxious about being Jewish in the America of the late 1940s, early 1950s. Antisemitism was very prevalent. You noticed a little remark in that letter I read of my mother's where um she's reassuring her mother that a guy she meets named Lokmeyer isn't Jewish. There was a certain antisemitism in her own family life and in fact, when she took up with her first husband, my grandfather had him investigated by a private detective. One of the documents I never managed to get my hands on is that detective report, which I'm very sorry if I hounded the poor [unclear] but he couldn't find it. Um, and so my grandfather clearly wasn't very thrilled about having a Jewish son-in-law.

59:00 Alexander Stille: So my father had probably some reasons to be anxious. And so and then there's an extraordinary, uh, in some ways I think the powerful and sad chapters of the book is a description of my parents wedding day, which my father, my mother, revealed to me in considerable detail on her deathbed. It was that - she recalled it with chilling detail - and she, my father hid from my mother his father. He had introduced her to his mother, who was a much more cultivated Moscow Jew, who was a person of the world. My grandfather instead, the one I referred to as Yellow Russia and then [unclear], was a much cruder kind of shtetl Jew. And so he would say things to my mother-in-law, um she'd give him a gift um and he'd say, how much did you pay for that sweater? She was a kind of well-bred WASP. She didn't, she'd be reluctant to talk about money, but at the same time, you're supposed to answer a question. Eventually, he'd get it out of her and he'd say twenty dollars? My friend on Second Avenue, same sweater ten dollars.

1:00:18 Alexander Stille: And so my mother found herself for the first time - the Jews that she had met were these kind of cultivated Chicago Jews who were like all the other people she'd met except better educated, more traveled, more cosmopolitan - suddenly she found herself face to face with a different kind of Jew, a shtetl Jew. And she said to me - uh she was a poor thing on medication, so it was hard to know how to take. She said, I looked at him, and I thought to myself, Hitler killed

six million Jews and spared this guy? And so she obviously, there was a kind of a certain amount of latent antisemitism that is somewhere in there. That was just part of society that she grew up in and so I think that was in the mix even though in her more conscious moments, um, she wouldn't obviously have subscribed to that. So it's complex and so I try to just describe it in its complexity. That's part of the strange mix of this marriage. I think, part of um, part of the mix of um you know America's um on again off again love affair with its you know immigrant population, its Jewish population in particular. Anything else? You don't need to ask questions. We can just chat and have a -

101:50 Speaker 2: How much of the, um, the geography of where your grandfather came from did they represent accurately to your father? Was there a clear appreciation, this is where we came from. You know many people don't remember the towns.

1:02:16 Alexander Stille: Yeah, well that's one of the things one of the things I talked about in the early part of the book, in this section about names and dates is that you know part of this contrast my boss grandfather in the family genealogy in which he traces his ancestors back to a boat called the Spotted Cow that went from you know Amsterdam to New York in 1632 or something like that um, and whereas many Jews who came here were fleeing something they wanted to forget about. And so many families encountered a lot of resistance from their elderly relatives when they would press them. Many of my friends would describe talking to their grandparents and they'd say, you don't want to know, you know, or in the old country or Europe and often got very, very sketchy stories and so that was part of it. In this case, they weren't quite that way um, and then as I said they kept all these documents which were useful to me in reconstructing some of it. And but certainly my father I think, consistent with that tradition, and this is sort of one of the themes of the book was very reluctant to talk about the past. He didn't like it. It made him uncomfortable. He hardly ever talked to us about being Jewish, talked very little about his Italian upbringing even though it was unquestionably the most important and possibly happiest time in his life. He really became himself in that, early in the 1930s. it was very, very meaningful then and yet he talked very very little about it. So, for me, part of the uh, part of my life story, part of the the kind of subplot in a way of this book is the kind of need to recover a past that's been sort of hidden from us. I think you know, growing up my parents I fear my father was a well-known Italian journalist wrote several thousand stories in Italian but didn't think to teach his children a language in which he was writing. Which, if you think about it, is a strange thing. Um, he never took us to Italy even though he went often um and so I felt the need to learn Italian and to go in search of that part of our life to kind of integrate the two halves of our family background. So that's sort of part of our history in a sense.

1:04:45 Speaker 3: What brought the Kamenentzki's to Italy?

1:04:50 Alexander Stille: Good question. No one quite knows. As I said, um -

1:04:53 Speaker 3: Did it have to do with Ginsburg's uh coming?

1:05:57 Alexander Stille: No, I don't think so. I think, um, uh, one of the things that we don't know exactly is that um, according to my aunt - your friend - she said my father looked at the map of Europe and said this is the freest place for Jews in Europe. Pointing at Italy and in early 1922 that was actually not a totally crazy thing to say because it really was a very open society towards Jewish minority and Jewish - Jews were thriving and uh in Italy and continued to do so even after Mussolini came to power. Um, but it is curious because my grandfather had been to the United States actually. He was kind of the black sheep of his family, as Beau Brummell, and he had gone to Amsterdam after graduating from high school. His parents gave him kind of a prize trip to Amsterdam and then he took up with a dancer there. Uh wired back home said he'd run out of money and needed more money to get home. He then used the money and followed the dancer to New York and then I think the relationship broke up because money ran out and he had to do something practical and trained as a dentist. So he had his dental technique and it served him well in his career. But so, you'd think, why wouldn't somebody who had been to the States and knew a little bit of English, go to England or the US [United States] rather than Italy? So it remains a little bit of a mystery. And my aunt also claimed that that there were sort of four unaccounted-for years of my grandfather's life where he padded around after he finished dentistry school and he was traveling around in his more Beau Brummell days and he may have gone Italy in that. He may have even been to Fiume but I'm pretty sure he didn't participate in the D'Annunzio's enterprise because my father was born in December of 1919. The occupation of Fiume happens in 1919. My my aunt is born in August of uh [19]21, so I'm not really sure how practical it would have been for him to uh get out of Russia and start the Fascist Revolution with D'Annunzio. So there it is. So we really don't quite know but that family, what my aunt said, was that he made a judgment about being a good place for Jews and that actually did prove to be the case. Anything else? All right stick around we can have some casual conversation and some snacks or whatever.

1:07:49 Susanne Hillman: I would like to thank professor Stille for a very fascinating talk.