

## Synopsis:

### **[re]member the world: a testament**

*strengthening generational ties through the mother line*

By Robin Stevens Payes

**Logline:** A Ukrainian-Jewish immigrant's haunting untold story of trauma spans generations as her granddaughter seeks to break the cycle of silenced family histories.

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As the war in Ukraine broke out in February, 2022, I suddenly felt the energetic pull of family history. In the 1890s, my Ukrainian-Jewish grandmother had escaped murderous pogroms to come to the Land of the Free. But they carried with them the trauma of growing up poor, persecuted, oppressed. It was never discussed in the family. I could see the ways that her fear had been passed to my mother in this survival lesson: success meant fitting in at any cost.

I began seeing the ways in which I had inherited it, too. I grew up walking on eggshells, worried that my mother might fret if I didn't live up to her expectations. When my brother chose his own path, she renounced him.

I shaped my life to be the child who would make her proud.

Fast forward to summer, 2023. I took a workshop on the persona poem (read: dramatic monologue) at the Chautauqua Institution, taught by the former poet-laureate of Boston. Our final prompt: write from the perspective of a family member or ancestor. My grandmother's voice came through. She wanted to tell the story of her coming over from Ukraine to America, a personal tragedy she'd never spoken of to anyone in life.

It gave me a glimpse of the trauma of the immigrant through my own family's story. But I knew this story was meant to be more than poetic memoir. It is a way of locating oneself in the web of family, of people and places lost and found, of belonging to one's past and future.

It is also informed by fact. As a science writer, I have written about epigenetics and the generational effects of trauma. As a fiction author, I have helped unveil the voices of women lost to history.

The evidence for healing the present by telling a new story can help break the mold is clear. For healing to occur, we must recover not only the traumas, but love and joy. Perhaps, in this way, we can heal the past as well.

Recounting a story that spans four generations of my family, including those who are no longer with us, *[re]member the world: a testament*, spins a glorious tapestry exposing scenes, seams, resentments, missteps, rejoicings and more.

Through it all, a singular mission carries through: bringing women's memories, women's voices to the fore, weaving their lives together through poetic narrative and prose, photographs and paintings, from generation to generation.

*L'dor vador.*