

## MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

**Grandfather:** *Tony Kahn looks in the mirror and realizes his grandfather never left.*

**Tony Kahn:**

Hi everybody. This is Tony Kahn the producer and director of *Morning Stories* from WGBH in Boston. I was going through a box of stuff in my house in one more misguided attempt to get organized, and I came across a photograph of my maternal grandfather, Isadore A. Brodie, who died when I was fifteen years old. We didn't talk that much to each other but suddenly, looking at his picture, I was hearing him again and realizing how much that voice of his, a voice he never raised, still has to say to me after all these years. [music box sounds] Today's *Morning Story* is about him. It's called *Grandfather*.

**Tony as a boy:**

Over here. Just over there further. Just a little bit over there. [older man's voice, "Here?"] Okay. Smile! [camera click]

**Tony Kahn:**

This was the snapshot I took of Grandfather when he was seventy-five and I was ten. I remember how nervous we were with each other that day. We'd just come to live with him after five long years in Mexico, where my father had lost his health and all our cash. "I hope Grandfather likes the picture," I remember thinking. "Without him, we have no place else to go."

The day we arrived, he gave us the ground floor of the house to live on and moved down here to the cellar to a little apartment he'd remodeled with his own hands. Here was the corner where he kept his bed, over there his desk where he'd sit and read the paper. There behind the boiler was his workshop with its rows of screws and nails neatly stored in mustard and pickle jars along the shelves.

**Tony as a boy:**

Grandfather. Lunch!

**Grandfather:**

I'm coming.

**Tony Kahn:**

One of my jobs was to go to the head of the stairs around noon every day and call him up for lunch. And every day, as he passed me by, I'd wonder what we really had in common. He was big and strong; I was small and unathletic. He loved coarse rye bread, stacks of it; I wouldn't eat a grape if it had seeds. He

read and spoke in Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew; after all my years in exile, different was the last thing I wanted to be.

Sometimes after school I'd come down here to the basement and, out of curiosity, look through Grandfather's picture albums and listen to his stories of the past. [Grandfather's voice, "and this ..."] "This was Sasha," he'd volunteer. "My schoolhood chum from Kiev. Or "This was my great uncle Saul, who claimed he spoke to the Tsar." Or "This was your grandmother, Bertha, the day we were married, just before we came to America." But for all his kindness, I always felt a reluctance from him to push his memories on me or intrude in any way on the life we were trying to live upstairs. His world remained a kind of alien planet to me, in a quiet orbit just beneath our own, connected by shared meals, shared smiles, and a respectful distance.

[Music changes to become more discordant and frantic. Mother's voice in background, "Oh my God, oh, someone! something's happened! Someone, call and ambulance! Please Father, Father can you hear me?"]

Then one day, a few years after we moved in, he had a stroke. One minute he was outside on the street arranging with a friend to cut some lumber. The next he was down on the sidewalk unable to move, or talk.

[Discordant music]

[Ticking sound] When he recovered enough to leave the hospital Mother moved him to a nursing home a few blocks from our house, and we'd see him every day. Usually he'd recognize us and cheerfully ask how we were. But more and more he'd wander into Russian, or Yiddish, or Polish and call out to boyhood friends who'd been gone for sixty years, or whisper the name of his bride.

[Footsteps, walking.]

One afternoon on my way home from school, I looked up and realized I'd gone to the nursing home instead. He was alone, and as I came in he shrank from me in fear. [suspenseful music. Grandfather speaking Russian, "*Kak kholodno zdes'* . . ."] I bent closer and realized he'd mistaken me for a Russian police officer. I knew then he'd gone from us completely, not to the long lost companions of his youth but to something I'd never seen in those picture albums, the shadow behind them, the pogroms and persecutions of his earliest years. His stroke had stolen him from America and held him fast in the Tsarist Russia of the late nineteenth century. [crowd noises, voices screaming in fear] This was the suffering that had scarred his childhood, this the persecution that had made his move to the basement seem like nothing, and this the storm of anti-Semitism that had made him so determined to shelter us and all our differences.

I started learning Russian in school, and with the few phrases I knew, I tried to bring him back. "*Dyedushka*," I'd whisper, "*Vsyo khorosho!*" [Russian phrase]" [boy Tony's voice repeating the Russian phrases] "Grandfather, it's all right." And "*Dyedushka, ty v Amerike!*" "Grandfather, you're with us, in America." And when my words failed me, I'd hold his hand, trying in spite of my embarrassment to comfort him, and like some emissary from his future, let him know that his life had not ended in the pogroms of his youth.

[Somber music with church bells chiming.]

I don't know if I ever reached him. He grew weaker and soon didn't speak at all. He died a few days later on the anniversary of his wife's death, looking as old as time.

[Bells continue.]

After he was gone, none of us went into the basement much. It was hard to look at the desk he wouldn't sit at any more or the books he wouldn't read and the pictures of all those people, who now that he was gone, had no one left to remember their name. But I see I was wrong. He never left. Once again, more clearly than I ever could as a child, I hear his voice. I understand his silences. I feel the fullness of his life.

A story comes back to me he told me long ago, about the sidewalks and the Tsar. [music box music] "One day," he said, "the rumor spread the Tsar was coming to town. 'So quick,' the police chief yells at us, 'make two sidewalks for his royal feet.' And when the sidewalks were finished they put guards at every corner to shove us away and keep our footprints from the wet cement. But it was autumn and even the Tsar can't boss the falling leaves. So down they came, thousands of them, while the guards stood helpless, and each leaf made a tiny imprint where it fell. Ha! And I bet you those marks are still there in stone, my boy. Now the Tsar and all his thugs are dust."

[Piano music builds]

I think of you, Grandfather and the mark you left on us, how deeply your kindness touched us, how clearly your voice still speaks in me after the silence of so many years. I look again at the picture of your wedding, almost a hundred years ago, just before you fled to America. I hear with you the hooves of hatred at your back. I sense your sorrow at leaving your home behind. I feel your faith in the future and your certainty that these faces of your family will never fade. And I realize with surprise and pride how much I now look like you.

That was today's Morning Story, *Grandfather*, from a grateful grandson. I'm in the studio with Gary Mott.

**Gary Mott:**

Tony, I really wish I had more one-on-one time with both of my grandfathers.

**Tony Kahn:**

You had a German grandfather...

**Gary Mott:**

Um, no.

**Tony Kahn:**

...The one who thought he was Swedish and ended up being Norwegian? ...

**Gary Mott:**

That was my uncle. [laughs]

**Tony Kahn:**

Oh, dear.

**Gary Mott:**

You, you have a great memory, though.

**Tony Kahn:**

But for the wrong people.

**Gary Mott:**

Still living. Still very upset that he's not Swedish. [laughs] I see shades of my grandfather in me. [Tony murmurs encouragingly] You know, the good listener, the, the sense of humor.

**Tony Kahn:**

Really?

**Gary Mott:**

That's true. I can remember his laugh – head back, just big and jovial and happy.

**Tony Kahn:**

There are certain people whose voices I still can hear so clearly. My mother's sister had the kind of laugh that would get you laughing. And she laughed about a lot of the situations that a lot of other people were far too serious about. [laughs] She would laugh you know "ha ha ha ha. Then she'd take a deep breath and go [snort]. [Gary and Tony laugh] Everybody around her was laughing.

**Gary Mott:**

Yeah, right.

**Tony Kahn:**

She was, she was great. She was like this big warm Coleman stove of a human being. And I still hear her laughter now.

We have also been hearing from some of our listeners.

**Gary Mott:**

We heard from Rob. "Over the years now that I have been listening to *Morning Stories*, it has become one of my favorites. Having lost my father in the last year, I found this Father's Day a little tough, and your story made me feel better. I have hours of video footage from over the years, and I need to go through and make up a reel of all the moments I have with my dad. I have sent a donation to *Morning Stories* and I'll keep sending one every month to keep the stories coming. Thanks for what you do."

**Tony Kahn:**

I have a suggestion for you Rob if you're listening. If you do get that video together, why don't you send some of it along and let's talk? Maybe there's a *Morning Story* in that. We love to do videos every once in a while. We have them on the website, so maybe that will be one of them.

**Gary Mott:**

Absolutely.

**Tony Kahn:**

Let me read an email. It begins with "Wow!" How can you not pay attention to a letter that begins with ...

**Gary Mott:**

You gotta open that one, huh?

**Tony Kahn:**

And so I quote, "Wow! I've never had an opportunity to listen to your fabulous show. Double Wow! Thank you! The lot of you must be truly gifted to have the karma and human attraction to receive such wonderful, insightful stories. Thank you from a West Coast PTA mom and a new fan." Everybody's got a really great story to tell if they know you're listening.

**Gary Mott:**

Another great letter from Alan in Silver Spring, Maryland: "Your recent conversation with Chinese listener and sometime storyteller, Bonnie Lee in which she said, 'most young people in China are open-minded now. They want to know more about new things from outside China.' called to mind an experience from the early 1960's. I was working in the research division of the US Information Agency doing audience research for the *Voice of America*. We conducted lotteries in which the listener was invited to send a postcard with a name, address, and the name of the program to which they listened, in return for which the listener would be eligible to win a Zenith transoceanic portable radio valued at about \$400. [Tony: "Whoa. Can you imagine what that would cost now?"] These were offered on programs beamed to many different countries. One was offered in Mandarin and not a single postcard was received from behind the Bamboo Curtain. How times have changed. *Morning Stories* may be doing more for international relations than a lot of other things. I hope you will continue and I've already sent a small contribution towards this end."

**Tony Kahn:**

Alan, thanks. Bonnie Lee translated one of our podcasts into Chinese. We have that available on our website. And I heard from her the other day and she's planning to do at least six, seven, eight more. Come to think of it, if there are any of you out there who'd like to translate *Morning Stories* into another language, please, we, we'd love to hear from you.

One last letter from a, a listener named Andrea about her relationship with her grandmother, Mimi. "She and I would ask each other questions that my mother hated. She thought they were too morbid. 'Would you rather be deaf or blind?' I would ask. Mimi would consider it from all angles before she answered, 'Mmm, deaf' because the thought of her missing the sight of my sweet face was just too much for her to bear. 'Would you rather die in your sleep or sitting up playing gin?' 'Would you rather get your finger slammed in a car door or your hair lit on fire by a seventeen-year-old track star running with a torch in the Fourth of July parade when you're in the crowd in your wheelchair, [Tony and Gary laugh] minding your business, enjoying yourself?' She had to think rather deeply about this one. She'd rather have her hair lit on fire because, surely, if it got out of control, why, a kindly bystander would put it out. In reality, Mimi had been hit by a train, while traveling with friends from LA to San Francisco early on a foggy morning. She had to be blowtorched out of there by three burly, handsome firemen whom she also described very vividly. Now the real live wreck left Mimi mostly crippled, but not defeated. In a very brave, Bette Davis sort of way, she got up and made herself walk. Hearing her story and knowing her, I learned that terrible things could happen, but the possibility was never a reason for staying where you are. I'm wrapped in the memory of how she gave to me more than others what she had the least, time – a legacy I have been building on with my own grandchildren."

**Gary Mott:**

What, what a terrific story and, let me tell you. <[WGBH.org/morningstories](http://WGBH.org/morningstories)>  
You can find many terrific stories. We have a complete archive and, as always,  
please get in touch with us at <[morningstories@WGBH.org](mailto:morningstories@WGBH.org)>.

**Tony Kahn:**

Don't forget to contribute as well so that we can keep *Morning Stories* coming to  
you. Take care. We'll see you soon. Bye-bye.

[Repeat of young Tony's and his grandfather's voices, "Over here. Just over  
there further. A little bit over there. [older man's voice, "Here?"] Okay. Smile!"  
[camera click]

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Susan MacLeod

Notes from transcriber:

What a treat to transcribe another Morning Story after waiting for about four  
months. To listen carefully to each word and phrase of your now familiar voices  
was like meeting up with old friends. It's nice to hear more optimism in your  
chat about the future of *Morning Stories*. I hope funding and new possibilities are  
making themselves known to you.

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Note from Liz:

I love this story! It embodies so much of what has made *Morning Stories* so  
special.