

Georgia Hunter was born in Massachusetts and raised in Providence, Rhode Island. She turned to writing at a rather early age when she penned her first book at the age of four: *Charlie Walks the Beast* (named after her father's recently published sci-fic novel, *Softly Goes the Beast*). Seven years later she submitted an article to her local paper on how she would spend her last day if all life on earth were about to end.

Hunter was 15 when she first learned from her grandmother of her Jewish heritage—and that her family had survived the Holocaust. Six years later, a family reunion lit the spark for her 2017 debut novel. Hosted at her parents' home, the family gathering drew 30 relatives from North America, South America, Europe, and Israel. Speaking in Portuguese, French and English, they told their family stories.

Around that same time, Hunter received her bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Virginia and settled on a career in marketing and branding. After seven years in Seattle, Washington, she and her husband, Robert Farinhold, decided to head back east. She freelanced as a copywriter for adventure travel outfitters.

It took Hunter nearly a decade to begin the saga of her grandfather and his four Kurc siblings whose descendants span the globe. *We Were the Lucky Ones* was born of her quest to uncover her family's staggering history. Hunter lives in Connecticut with her husband and their two sons.

Author's Note (from GeorgiaHunterAuthor.com):

When I was growing up, my grandfather Eddy (the Addy Kurc of my story) was, for all I could tell, American through and through. He was a successful businessman. His English, to my ear, was perfect. He lived in a big, modern house up the road from ours, with floor-to-ceiling picture windows, a porch over the garage, and a Ford in the driveway. I thought little of the fact that the only children's songs he ever taught me were in French, that ketchup (a chemical product, as he called it) was strictly banned from his pantry, or that he'd made half of the things in his home himself (the contraption that dangled his soap by a magnet over the bathroom sink to keep it dry; the clay busts of his children in the stairwell; the cedar sauna in his basement; the living room drapes, woven on a handmade loom). I found it curious when he'd say things like "Don't parachute on your peas" at the dinner table (What did that even mean?), and mildly annoying when he'd pretend not to hear me if I answered one of his questions with a "yeah" or "uh-huh"—"Yes" was the only answer that met his grammatical standards. Looking back, I suppose others might have labeled these habits as unusual. But I, an only child with a single living grandfather, knew nothing different. Just as I was deaf to the slight inflection my mother now tells me he carried in his English diction, I was blind to his quirks. I loved my Papa dearly; he simply was who he was.

Of course, there were things about my grandfather that impressed me greatly. His music, to start. I'd never met a person as devoted to his art. His shelves overflowed with 33-rpm records, alphabetically arranged by composer, and with books and books of repertory for the piano.

There was always music playing in his home—jazz, blues, classical, sometimes an album of his own. Often I would arrive to find him at the keys of his Steinway, a no. 2 pencil tucked behind his ear as he plotted melodies for a new composition, which he'd practice and tweak and practice some more until he was happy with it. Every now and then he would ask me to sit beside him as he played, and my heart would race as I'd watch him closely, waiting for the subtle nod that meant it was time to flip to the next page of his sheet music. "Merci, Georgie," he'd say as we reached the end of the piece, and I'd beam up at him, proud to have been helpful. On most days, once my grandfather was finished with his own work, he would ask if I'd like a lesson, and I would always say yes—not because I shared his affinity for the piano (I was never very good at it), but because I knew how happy it made him to teach me. He'd pull a beginner's book from the shelf and I would rest my fingers tentatively on the keys, feeling the warmth of his thigh against mine, and I would try my hardest not to make any mistakes as he walked me patiently through a few bars of Haydn's Surprise symphony. I wanted badly to impress him.

Along with my grandfather's musical prowess, I was also in awe of his ability to speak seven languages, which I attributed to the fact that he had offices around the world and family in Brazil and in France, although the only relative of his generation that I knew by name was Halina, a sister with whom he was especially close. She visited a few times, from São Paulo, and occasionally a cousin my age would come from Paris to stay with us for a few weeks in the summertime to learn English. Everyone in his family, it seemed, had to speak at least two languages.

What I didn't know about my grandfather when I was a kid was that he was born in Poland, in a town once home to over 30,000 Jews; that his birth name wasn't actually Eddy (as he later renamed himself) but Adolph, though growing up, everyone called him Addy. I had no idea he was the middle of five children, or that he spent nearly a decade of his life not knowing whether his family had survived the war, or whether they'd perished in concentration camps, or been among the thousands executed in the ghettos of Poland.

My grandfather didn't keep these truths from me intentionally—they were simply pieces of a former life he'd chosen to leave behind. In America, he had reinvented himself, devoting his considerable energy and creativity entirely to the present and future. He was not one to dwell on the past, and I never thought to ask him about it.

My grandfather died of Parkinson's disease in 1993, when I was fourteen. A year later, a high school English teacher assigned our class an "I-Search" project intended to teach us research skills while we dug up pieces of our ancestral pasts. With my grandfather's memory so fresh, I decided to sit down for an interview with my grandmother, Caroline, his wife of nearly fifty years, to learn more about his story.

It was during this interview that I first learned of Radom. At the time I had no concept of how significant this place once was to my grandfather, or how important it would become to me—so much so that in twenty years, I would be drawn to visit the city, to walk the cobblestone streets,

imagining what it might have been like to grow up there. My grandmother pointed to Radom on a map, and I wondered aloud if, after the war, my grandfather ever returned to his old hometown. No, my grandmother said. Eddy never had any interest in going back. She went on to explain that Eddy was lucky enough to be living in France when the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939 and that he was the only member of his family to escape from Europe at the start of the war. She told me he was once engaged to a Czech woman he met aboard a ship called the *Alsina*; that she herself first laid eyes on him in Rio de Janeiro, at a party on Leme Beach; that their first child, Kathleen, was born in Rio just a few days before he reunited with his family—parents and siblings, aunts and uncles and cousins he hadn't seen or heard from for nearly a decade. Somehow, they'd all miraculously survived a war that annihilated over 90 percent of Poland's Jews and (I would later discover) all but about 300 of the 30,000 Jews from Radom.

Once his family was settled in Brazil, my grandmother explained, she and my grandfather moved to the United States, where my mother Isabelle and my uncle Tim were born. My grandfather didn't waste any time in changing his name from Adolph Kurc (pronounced "Koortz" in Polish) to Eddy Courts, or in taking the oath of American citizenship. It was a new chapter for him, my grandmother said. When I asked if he maintained any of his customs from the Old World, she nodded. He barely spoke of his Jewish upbringing, and no one knew he was born in Poland—but he had his ways about him. Just as the piano was an integral part of his own upbringing, my grandfather insisted that his children practice an instrument every day. Conversation at the dinner table had to be in French. He made espresso long before most of his neighbors had ever heard of it, and he loved bartering with the open-air vendors at Boston's Haymarket Square (from which he would often return with a paper-wrapped beef tongue, insisting it was a delicacy). The only candy he allowed in the house was dark chocolate, brought back from his travels to Switzerland.

My interview with my grandmother left my head spinning. It was as if a veil had been lifted, and I could see my grandfather clearly for the first time. Those oddities, those traits that I'd chalked up as quirks—many of them, I realized, could be attributed to his European roots. The interview also sparked an array of questions. What happened to his parents? His siblings? How did they survive the war? I pressed my grandmother for details, but she was able to share only a few sparse facts about her in-laws. I met his family after the war, she said. They hardly spoke of their experiences. At home, I asked my mother to tell me all that she knew. Did Papa ever talk to you about growing up in Radom? Did he tell you about the war? I asked. The answer was always no.

And then in the summer of 2000, a few weeks after I'd graduated from college, my mother offered to host a Kurc family gathering at our house on Martha's Vineyard. She and her cousins agreed—they didn't see each other nearly enough, and many of their children had never even met. It was time for a reunion. As soon as the idea was seeded, the cousins (there are ten in all) began arranging their travel, and when July rolled around, family flew in from Miami, Oakland, Seattle, and Chicago, and from as far away as Rio de Janeiro, Paris, and Tel Aviv. With children and spouses included, we numbered thirty-two in total.

Each night of our reunion, my mother's generation, along with my grandmother, would gather on the back porch after dinner and talk. Most nights I'd hang out with my cousins, draped over the living room sofas, comparing hobbies and tastes in music and movies. (How was it that my Brazilian and French cousins knew American pop culture better than I did?) On the last evening, however, I wandered outside, settled down on a picnic bench next to my aunt Kath, and listened.

My mother's cousins conversed with a sense of ease, despite their distinctly different upbringings and native tongues and the fact that many hadn't seen each other in decades. There was laughter, a song—a Polish lullaby Anna and Ricardo recalled from their childhoods, taught to them by their grandparents, they said—a joke, more laughter, a toast to my grandmother, the lone representative of my grandfather's generation. Languages often alternated mid-sentence between English, French, and Portuguese; it was all I could do to keep up. But I managed, and when conversation shifted to my grandfather and then to the war, I leaned in.

My grandmother's eyes brightened as she recounted meeting my grandfather for the first time in Rio. It took me years to learn Portuguese, she said. Eddy learned English in weeks. She spoke of how obsessed my grandfather was with American idioms and how she didn't have the heart to correct him when he botched one in conversation. My aunt Kath shook her head as she recalled my grandfather's habit of showering in his undergarments—a means of bathing and laundering his clothes simultaneously when he was on the road; he would do just about anything, she said, in the name of efficiency. My uncle Tim remembered how my grandfather would embarrass him by striking up conversations—everyone from waiters to passersby on the street. He could talk to anyone, he said, and the others laughed, nodded, and from the way their eyes shined I could tell how adored my grandfather was by his nieces and nephews.

I laughed along with the others, wishing I'd known my grandfather as a young man, but my smile quickly faded when a Brazilian cousin, Józef, began telling stories of his father—my grandfather's older brother. Genek and his wife Herta, I learned, had been exiled during the war to a Siberian gulag. Goose bumps sprung to my arms as Józef told of how he was born in the barracks, in the thick of winter, how it was so cold his eyes would freeze shut at night and his mother would use the warmth of her breast milk each morning to coax them open.

Hearing this, it was all I could do not to shout, She what? But as shocking as the revelation was, others soon followed, each somehow as astounding as the last. There was the story of Halina's hike over the Austrian Alps—while pregnant; of a forbidden wedding in a blacked-out house; of false IDs and a last-ditch attempt to disguise a circumcision; of a daring breakout from a ghetto; of a harrowing escape from a killing field. My first thought was, Why am I just learning these things now? And then: Someone needs to write these stories down.

At the time, I had no idea that someone would be me. I didn't go to bed that night thinking I should write a book about my family history. I was twenty-one, with a freshly minted degree under my arm, focused on finding a job, an apartment, my place in the “real world.” Nearly a

decade would pass before I'd set off for Europe with a digital voice recorder and an empty notebook to begin interviewing relatives about the family's experiences during the war. What I fell asleep with that evening was a stirring sensation in my gut. I was inspired. Intrigued. I had a boatload of questions, and I craved answers.

I have no idea what time it was when we all finally meandered back to our rooms from the porch—I just recall that it was Felicia, one of my mother's cousins, who was the last to speak. She was a bit older, and more reserved than the others, I'd noticed. While her cousins were gregarious and uninhibited, Felicia was serious, guarded. When she spoke, there was sadness in her eyes. I'd learned that night that she was just shy of a year old at the start of the war, nearly seven at its end. Her memory was still sharp, it seemed, but sharing her experiences made her uneasy. It would be years before I would gently uncover her story, but I remember thinking that night that whatever memories she harbored must have been painful.

"Our family," Felicia said in her thick French accent, her tone sober, "we shouldn't have survived. Not so many of us, at least." She paused, listening to the breeze rattling the leaves in the scrub oak trees beside the house. The rest of us were silent. I held my breath, waiting for her to go on, to offer up some sort of explanation. Felicia sighed and brought a hand to the place on her neck where her skin was still pockmarked, I would later learn, by a near-fatal case of scurvy she'd contracted during the war. "It's a miracle in many ways," she finally said, looking out toward the tree line. "We were the lucky ones."

These words would stay with me until the burn to understand how, exactly, my relatives could have defied such odds finally overcame me and I couldn't help but start digging for answers. *We Were the Lucky Ones* is the story of my family's survival.