

Why do we want to pass down our memories?

As she's gotten older, Carol Backman has found that people see her differently.

"People look at you as being invisible. Maybe they don't, but I feel it sometimes," said Backman, 71, who taught high school math for 25 years. "You're retired or not working like you used to. You don't have the relationships you used to. But I can still say I'm in my writer's group."

For the past decade, Backman, who lives in Silver Spring, has led the Memoir Writing Group at the Pozez Jewish Community Center of Northern Virginia.

Group members meet every month (virtually, since the pandemic started) to share essays containing snapshots of their lives — hobbies, family members, challenges they've overcome. Tales inspired by keepsakes and current events, of the everyday, of trauma and resilience.

"There's a yearning to have an identity, to belong and to keep your memory going — you don't want to disappear," Backman said. "I have three grandchildren, and there are so many things I want to pass on to them. The idea is to keep your memories alive, to keep yourself alive."

The act of remembering is also part of being Jewish, she said.

In his book "Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory," the late Columbia University professor of Jewish history Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi notes that the commandment

to remember, "zachor," appears nearly 200 times in the Hebrew Bible: remember the covenant, remember the Sabbath, remember that you were once slaves in Egypt.

Many Jewish rituals are meant to evoke memories. On Passover, we eat matzah so that we may remember the Exodus. Similarly, in his seminal work "Remembrance of Things Past," French-Jewish author Marcel Proust writes about being reminded of his childhood by the taste of a madeleine cake dunked in tea.

And today, remembering the Holocaust is essential to the Jewish identities of more than three-quarters of U.S. Jews, according to the most recent Pew Research Center survey.

Indeed, through millennia of diaspora and persecution, collective memory has been crucial to the continuity of the Jewish people.

"Memory is part of our Jewish DNA," said Bruce Black, editorial director of The Jewish Writing Project. "Judaism — its stories and legends, its history and recipes, its values and even its humor — can survive only if it is handed down... from one generation to the next."

Finding humor in painful experiences

Rich Polt, a Towson resident, thinks of memories as heirlooms. He runs the company Acknowledge Media, producing legacy videos based on conversations

THE MYSTERY BEHIND M

By Rudy Malcom

with loved ones and layered with photos, keepsakes and music.

Some may worry that wanting to record their memories is selfish or could be perceived that way. But, according to Polt, “it’s really not that at all. It’s about safeguarding that which is most precious for a family for future generations, which is our stories about where we come from and who we are.”

While everyone should preserve their memories, Polt said, it can be particularly important for Jews. Catholic churches, for instance, kept birth and marriage records, whereas synagogues historically did not. Many of the few records that did exist were burned or lost during pogroms and migration.

Yet Polt stressed the importance of what Marshall Duke, a psychology professor at Emory University, calls the “intergenerational self” – a self that is defined by one’s placement in a family history. Duke’s research suggests that the children with the most self-confidence and resilience are the ones who have a strong intergenerational self and know the ups and downs of their family narratives.

Paula Haimes, a retired teacher who lives in Arlington and belongs to the Pozez JCC’s memoir group, described writing as “a wonderful way to reconnect to your family.”

She is working on a memoir about her sister-in-law, who was killed in a car crash in 2015. She hopes to one day

share it with her two grandchildren, so that they can “feel close to Cynthia.”

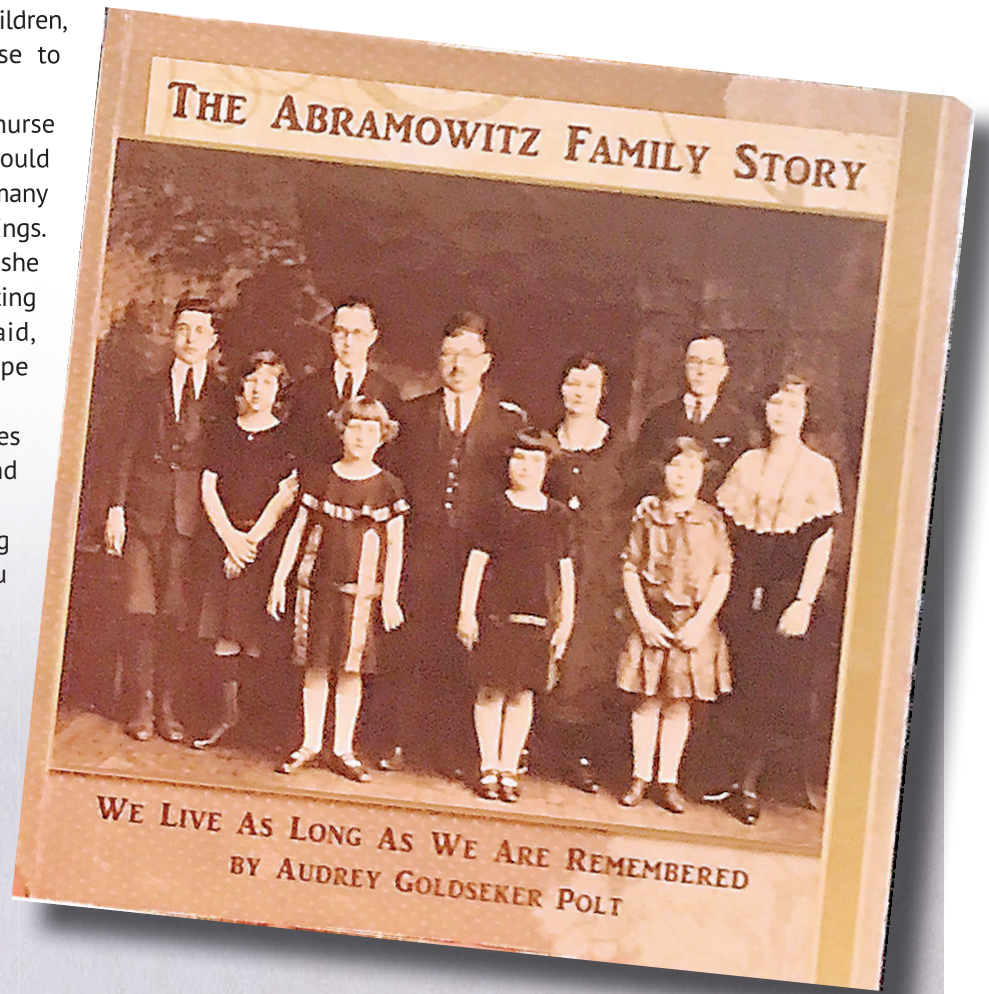
Fay Menacker, a retired nurse from Alexandria, said she would bring her husband, who had many health issues, to group meetings. After he died in March 2020, she decided to stick around. Writing memoirs herself, she said, “absolutely” helped her cope with the loss.

Menacker said that she uses memoir to find the joy and humor in painful experiences.

“You can’t really do anything about them,” she said, “but you have to get through them.”

A way of defeating death

According to Robert Neimeyer, a psychology professor at the University of Memphis, we look for – and create – meaning after the



MEMOIR-WRITING

Special to WJW





Carol Backman, in pink sweater, meets with her memoir group.

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CAROL BACKMAN
LEADS THE MEMOIR WRITING GROUP AT
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death of a loved one. "A central task of grieving," he and his colleagues wrote in a 2014 paper, "is the reconstruction of those narratives."

Indeed, though our writing can be for family members and other readers, it can also help us as writers to make sense of our experiences and ourselves.

In 1999, two psychologists at the University of Texas at Austin, James Pennebaker and Janel Seagal, found that writing about important personal experiences in an emotional way can improve physical and mental health.

Audrey Polt, Rich's mother, said that it is valuable to write about family regardless of whether your relationships were positive or negative.

"Having those memories preserved, upon reflection, can also help you face the past with a more mature perspective, rather than avoid dealing with unresolved issues," she said.

Formerly a senior consultant for Creative Memories, Polt is now an independent consultant and educator, chronicling Baltimoreans' lives through albums of photos and stories. The shelves of her basement studio are lined with traditional scrapbook albums and digital albums, which include family histories she created in tribute to her parents.

The one for her mother, who died when Polt was in her 20s, is captioned, "We live as long as we are remembered."

"If you leave some legacy of your thoughts and your writing, then you're never really gone," Polt said. "The people who follow you will have what you've left them, and they'll carry that with them forever. It's such a profound gift."

Chris Palmer, an author on aging and dying who runs a memoir group in Bethesda, said that preserving our memories is a way of "defeating death."

"When you write things down, you're sticking up a big, fat middle finger to death and saying, 'Despite you, I'm going to live on in the memories of my loved ones,'" he said.

In an article for ReformJudaism.org, Bruce Black advises aspiring memoirists to jot down as many details — conversations, images and senses — as they can remember. Then, come back to what you've written after a day or two,



Audrey Polt holds her mother's heritage album.

identify the strongest emotions and clearest images and begin shaping your narrative around conflict or specific dramatic moments.

Palmer noted that, as a hospice volunteer, he sees many people who regret not writing down their memories sooner.

Deborah Selmonosky of Falls Church, a stay-at-home mom who joined the Pozez JCC's memoir group six months ago, stressed that "you don't have to wait until you're

older" to start documenting family history because "you never know what tomorrow's going to bring" — something she learned when her father suffered (and survived) a major heart attack in the 1980s.

"Don't wait until you're retired or later in life to start documenting history," she said. "There's such richness in the lives of your family members you might not even know. Start asking questions now." **WJW**