



The  
Communist  
and the  
Communist's  
Daughter

✧

*A Memoir*

JANE LAZARRE



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Daughter

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Cover art: Bill in Madrid, Spain during the Brunete Offensive, 1937.

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TO Ruth Sidney Charney and  
Douglas Hughes White

AND FOR THE  
CHILDREN AND  
GRANDCHILDREN OF  
BILL LAZARRE:

Emily Lazarre  
Adam Lazarre-White  
Khary Lazarre-White  
Sarah Lazarre-Bloom  
Simon Lazarre-Bloom  
Aiyana Grace Taylor White



Members of the American Brigade, Spain, 1937.

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## *Author's Note*

Documents and references to works researched and read appear throughout these chapters. As I did not want to interrupt the flow of the story with footnotes or explanatory notes of any kind, all sources are cited at the end of the book. In general, I adhered to usage and spelling used in documents, for example, the lowercase *negro*. Bold sans-serif text is used for official transcriptions.

My father's name is spelled in various ways on various documents—Lazarowitz, Lazarovitz, Lazarowich—I have used Lazarovitz, as that is most common on legal documents.

The story of my father's sister Rose, some aspects of the portrait of my mother, as well as the re-creation of my father's thoughts, in italics, are combinations of traces of memory enhanced by imagination.



Front row (l to r), Bill, Uncle Buck; back row,  
Tullah (on the right) and her sisters; 1940s.

## *Acknowledgments*

I owe many kinds of acknowledgment in the writing of a memoir like this one. Friends, family, scholars, and writers I do and do not know all added to my learning and appreciation of the chapters of my father's life.

As I mention within the book itself, I obtained many of the documented materials of my father's life through the essential and dedicated help of Tom Manoff. I am filled with respect, gratitude, and ongoing affection for him.

A crucial find—the entire transcript of William Lazar's Appeal to the Court of Pennsylvania—was made by Jeremi Duru, professor of law and dear friend. I thank him for his help in many ways. For advice on research and a crucial introduction to the Archives of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade at the Tamiment Library at New York University, I thank Robert Sink, archivist and friend, as well as for always reminding me of the importance of preserving records of all kinds.

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Now I come to some people for whom words will hardly suffice to express my debt and thanks. For reading and for listening to the book, from the very early scenes to the last drafts, my writing group has stood by this work and by me, commenting, encouraging, and helping me to persevere through a long illness. Beverly Gologorsky, Jan Clausen, and Jocelyn Lieu—you are midwives

to this work in every way—are wonderful writers, gifted listeners, superb responders, and dear friends. I owe a special debt to Beverly Gologorsky, whose generosity seems limitless, and who provided one of my first edits, giving me essential and perfect advice in her reading of the manuscript.

My dear friend and sister writer, Ruth Charney, read emailed chapters, listened to scenes, provided insights into our shared history, and edited complete versions over years of writing. My husband, Douglas White, and my son Khary Lazarre-White helped me with early readings, attentive response, and research; Khary's editing was always precise and incisive, and he was always willing to take over technology demands when computer anxiety had its way with me. My son Adam Lazarre-White, a gifted writer himself, read and commented on the book in its first completed draft. His knowledge of the difficulties in any artist's path strengthens me.

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Phyllis Beren, Sarah Stemp, Josephine Wright, and Gary Schlesinger have worked with me on their writing for years, and are now both colleagues and friends. They read selected portions of this work, and discussed the forms of memoir and story and the poetry of language with me in ways that have taught me much as I listened and responded to their growing bodies of work—including discussions of the importance and difficulties of publishing in this time.

Which leads me to the unique person of Miriam Angress, associate editor at Duke University Press. She shepherded this book through its path toward acceptance at Duke, and was always uncommonly attentive, imaginative, helpful at every stage, and patient with my many questions and concerns. Her personal responses to this work have been a gift, and in this current publishing atmosphere, where many writers are so often treated with dismissals and disrespect, her work with me has been a true blessing. I thank her as well as Stephen A. Cohn, director of the Press, and all of the excel-

lent workers at Duke who have provided copyediting, marketing advice and direction, and wonderful cover designs, and have performed many other tasks over many books and years. I am especially grateful to Sara Leone, project editor, whose knowledge, skill, and sensitivity to my work I cannot exaggerate. My great thanks.

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Although they are referenced numerous times in the book itself, I want to emphasize how much I learned from Peter N. Carroll and George Charney. Their books educated and inspired me throughout. I learned, too, from Edwin Rolfe's memoir and poetry, from Danny Duncan Collum's and Victor A. Berch's *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War: "This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do,"* and from rereading George Orwell's classic work *Homage to Catalonia*.

No book or work of art stands alone. Consciously and unconsciously, we all build on what was written before. I am continually inspired and influenced by memoirs read and reread over many years, especially *The Woman Warrior*, by Maxine Hong Kingston; *I Could Tell You Stories*, by Patricia Hampl; *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, by Amos Oz; *The Pure Element of Time*, by Haim Be'Er; *A Sketch of The Past*, by Virginia Woolf; *Notes of A Native Son*, by James Baldwin; and *Patterns of Childhood*, by Christa Wolf. These writers set the standard for the genre of memoir—respectful of literary traditions yet revolutionary in creating new possibilities. I keep learning from them all.

My sister, Emily Lazarre, and my brother-in-law, Emanuel Bloom, helped me with crucial materials about the Spanish Civil War, including the history of the monument to the Lincoln Vets in San Francisco. I was so proud of my sister for her work on this project, especially when our family gathered at the monument to view it for the first time, surrounded by friends and families of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

My cousin, Miriam Goldberg, corresponded with me regularly as we tried to remember and gather information about our family history, and expressed a faith in me and in this work that meant very much to me.

I thank Jocelyn Lieu, Karen Flores Reininger, Daniel Ross, and Lisa Rodriguez Ross for their review and corrections of my Spanish.

Two people died before this book was completed, but both affected my life and work in many ways. My friend Sara Ruddick provided deep knowledge of the complex layers of family life in her writing and in our years of shared stories. Dr. Louis Lauro's wisdom and understanding enabled me to come to a new understanding of my father's and my story that gave rise to the original desire to write this book. I can't imagine this work having been written without him and the years of our work together.

Finally, one last time I want to thank my family. My sons, Adam Lazarre-White and Khary Lazarre-White, whose lives and commitments are a tribute to their grandfather, fill me with pride and gratitude. Their support of my work since they were old enough to understand it is an incomparable joy. My husband, Douglas Hughes White, lived through every stage with me, showing his usual patience, love, generosity, and faith in me. Without him, nothing, including my writing, would be the same.



Bill and his two sisters, Kishinev, ca. 1915.



Bill in the Party Office, ca. late 1930s or early 1940s.





Bill with his grandson, Adam, 1969.

It used to be all just a fog of thought, an intimation.  
There is a lot to be said for this writing things down.  
The fog gets pushed away, and the truth or some  
semblance of it stands stark and naked, not always a  
comfortable matter, no. But that was the task at hand,  
I suppose, to try my utmost to throw a makeshift  
bridge towards the future even though the iron work  
and the cables fade away to nothing in the distant air.

SEBASTIAN BARRY, *THE TEMPORARY GENTLEMAN*

. . . the fragments join in me with their own music.

MURIEL RUKEYSER, *THE POEM AS MASK*

## *Prologue*

Therefore, the crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the difference between fact and truth . . . my single gravest responsibility is to tell the truth.

TONI MORRISON, "THE SITE OF MEMORY"

My father was a Communist Party organizer, a fervent believer in the political philosophy of Marxism-Leninism, the intellectual foundation of what became a faith, ideas that had nurtured and inspired him since his adolescence in "the old country" of Kishinev, Romania.

Or Russia—he would always add—Russia, Romania—borders changing with passing years and alterations in power, shifting national identities reflecting, it seems to me, other shifting borders and changes moving through my father's life.

My father, a man with at least three names: his first, in the old country, Itzrael Lazarovitz; the one on his citizenship papers, anglicized by himself, William Lazar, later to become Lazarre, an elegant addition of letters made by his elegant wife, our mother; and his Communist Party name, Bill Lawrence.

I use all his names in this memoir, a story pieced together from chaotic shards of experience, memories both lucid and vague, at times consecutive and coherent, then suddenly crossing time and space as sounds and silence gather into images and words.

My father, Bill: a revolutionary leader, a commissar in the Spanish Civil War, and a teacher—labors with overlaps in methods and aims. He taught in a public square, and one of his early speeches there landed him in a Philadelphia prison in the 1920s. By the early 1930s he was teaching Marxism in the old Communist Party school on 12th Street in Manhattan. In 1931, the Communist Party sent him to study at the Lenin School in the Soviet Union. When he returned, he assumed a full-time post as a section leader to new Communist recruits and seasoned organizers. By the early 1950s, when his world and position had changed radically, he taught groups of Party members who were sitting around our living room to discuss current events and evaluate the swiftly changing politics of the time. And—always—through books, “discussions” and lectures at times—he taught his daughters, nephews and nieces, or any other Communist Children who were around and interested. He had been a writer too—of articles and essays about political ideals and strategies, and about the fight against fascism in the Spanish Civil War. My life as a writer and a teacher are in part a legacy from him. Through all the years, I have heard my father’s voice, asking questions, expressing conviction, searching for the best words as he tried to explain.

“My blood is coursing through your veins!” he would shout at us, his children, when he was insisting on his love, or when he was angry, usually at me, for some rebellion too far from his principles to abide. I feel his blood coursing through my veins now—material genes, palpable and energizing.

Beginning this story, I hear his voice reminding me that no one escapes the forces of history in shaping ourselves. As my own education continued over years and I became a teacher myself, I wanted my students to come to see how our individual voices and silences are mirrored in the broader history of voice and silence. As I begin to write my father’s story, I witness my sons, in different professional contexts also teachers, with the same questions and principles driving their work and growth. Blood seems to be coursing still.

I must have taken this knowledge in first with our childhood Sunday dinners—the broiled lamb chops and inevitable boiled chicken taking second place to dinner table talk about inequality, especially the inequalities of class—though he did not use that word with us when we were young. Working people, he would say—including Negro (the proper word then)

workers, and women workers (“The Woman Question” always included in serious political talk)—were *our people*, the ones whose lives and interests we were never to move far from in our concerns.

But I was not always an ardent follower of my father’s views and examples. Perhaps even more than the typical adolescent, I rebelled against him and some of his beliefs. In high school, where I majored in painting and sculpture in what was then the High School of Music and Art, I encountered ideas that reflected what I had always felt yet could not fully express—the complex realities beneath conscious perception and manifest appearance. In college I became friends with a group of English majors and poets who were already immersed in Freud’s theory of the unconscious, how it applied to our intimate lives, illuminated the literature we were reading and planning to write ourselves some day. To use Toni Morrison’s perfect phrase, I fell in love with the “deep story,” and at the age of eighteen I began a long, traditional psychoanalysis. I was encountering a possibility of internal freedom not, in my mind, antithetical to my father’s, and one of our long-standing battles began.

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Recently, I was standing on the shore of a peaceful bay at the tip of Long Island where on a clear day you can see the land across miles of water—the trees, the hills, a lighthouse, a boat approaching. Color and shape change dramatically with the angle of the sun. In a certain remarkable light that suffuses that stretch of beach as evening approaches, pinks and golds stripe the sky, lending striking triangular streams of glitter to the water that look like, though they are not, starlight. Both panoramas—the clarity of the first, the lit-up creation of the second—are equally necessary, equally real.

As I think about that view across the bay, the need for realistic perspective and also for lit-up imagination, I wonder about what Christa Wolf once called “the shape of conscience.” Violence spreads across the Earth. Iraqis, Syrians, Nigerians, African Americans, and Latino Americans in our own cities, Americans of all backgrounds, including young children, are murdered, made homeless, incarcerated, suffering unbearable loss by the thousands. A few miles uptown from where I sit writing, my son directs an organization in Harlem that serves children and youth<sup>1</sup>—academically, emotionally, ethically, and legally—children who, if not for independently created organiza-

tions like this one, would be largely forgotten by a society of incomparable wealth, power, and possibility. My thoughts turn again to my father, the Communist, of his concept of human freedom, whose sources and contours for him were always social and economic, but a concept that without an imagined ideal would quickly have died.

His passion was for the world and its people. From his earliest years in the old country of his birth, he lived to increase justice, human equality, *dignity*—he would have called it. He risked his life and reputation to this end. But his most immediate and, it turned out, most compelling passion, especially after his wife died, was for the children—his two girls.

About a year ago, in dreams and unbidden fantasies, I was repeatedly crossing a bridge that reached across a river as wide as the Hudson that flows only a few blocks from my home. In my dreams about this bridge, coming toward me from the other side, sometimes vague in a cloud of mist, sometimes as clear as the city on a cold and bright winter afternoon, is my father.

I enter into his story as if into unknown territory, even though, unlike my mother who died when I was seven, I knew him long enough to really know him—even given the long years of idealization and anger we all retain for our parents, those easily blamed and eagerly criticized souls. I knew him in ways I never got to know her: I know his stories, or enough of them to have a good sense of his history over nearly seventy years, to be able to guess with at least some confidence how to fill in the blanks. I knew his power of language and analysis, the depression that stalked him on and off for years, his love of stories and of books, how nervous and anxious he could suddenly become. On Sunday nights, he would come into our room, sit on one of our beds, and begin a tap-tap-tapping motion with his fingers on a nearby surface, one of many motions signaling his anxiety. One of us named this feeling “the creeps.” “I have the creeps,” he’d say—and we’d all smile in recognition. We had no idea, then, he was anticipating a futile weekly job search that lasted for years after his leadership position in the Communist Party came to an end.

Every morning out he went, dressed in a pressed suit, always navy blue, a tie, blue-and-red-striped or a patterned blue and gray, fitted neatly beneath a freshly washed and ironed shirt, usually pale blue but sometimes white, and going—where? We did not know for years and did not ask. He must have

walked the city, stopped in for a sandwich, gone to the library. Perhaps—I hope—he visited an old comrade in a similar position, lost without the Party, unemployable and untrained.

“What should I have put on my resume when they ask for employment history?” he’d ask us later when we were old enough to understand. “For the past several decades I’ve been working as a section organizer and high-level officer of the American Communist Party? And as for education? Finished fifth grade in Kishinev, Russia.”



Now that I have passed the age of sixty-eight, the age he was when he died, I know there is no certain blessing of absolute confidence in one’s own memory or point of view. But at times and in some ways there can be a feeling of solidity and clarity, like standing in an old familiar place and thinking, *Yes. I know what happened here; I know who he or she is. Or was. Or even, I know who I am, who I have been, and who I have become.* Becoming a grandmother, being the daughter of a Russian Jewish immigrant and a Communist, being the white mother of two black sons and the wife of an African American man for over forty-five years—all these have shaped my consciousness and my conscience.

Yet only recently have I come to appreciate the depth of my similarities to my father, the virtues and faults I share with him, the very ones I used in fervent differentiation. (*At least I am not like that! I would never do that to my child!*) And I also know the opposite truth—how different I am from him, how different one can be even from those closest and most loved—a husband of nearly fifty years, two men who were once my own boys.

How different I am from my father.

How like him I finally see I am.



As I began this work I wondered, How close to the bone dare I write? What shall I try to remember? What old notebooks do I retrieve from their high dusty shelf and reread? What is the scope of this search, this research—how to shape a blend of imagination, recorded history, and personal memory? What shall I make up? What does that childhood phrase even mean? How to capture in words the tones of a man long dead yet whose voice in my

head is as clear at times as the actual voice of my husband, or a friend I may talk to every day. A man whose words could range from what now sounds like predigested rhetoric but was then a revolutionary vocabulary defining an ideology that promised to rescue the world; to the most naked cries of unmasked pain spat out into sound to the lyrics of songs in English, Russian, and Yiddish, memorized perfectly because they so perfectly fit his often overflowing emotions, to shouts of disdainful criticism; to a laughter so complete it generated liquefying spills from eyes and skin and mouth, all quickly wiped with a white cotton handkerchief grabbed out of a pocket, crushed into his fist for compulsive twisting and untwisting as he spoke; to frequent declarations of love for us, his daughters, the sacrifices he made for us backing up his passionate words.

My father: it might be possible to scale his-my-our story down to a clean boneline if his bones were not dust, cremated long ago, buried by me in the earth of my mother's and his brother's graves, which lie side by side in a huge, somewhat overwhelming cemetery in Long Island, New York, both graves overgrown and neglected for many years.

"Forgiveness,"<sup>2</sup> I called the story of that makeshift, long ago burial, and I believe I did forgive him, then newly dead and I, just twenty-eight with a two-year-old son to adore and a new husband to love. Everything seemed possible. Why not forgiveness? And forgetting. That too.

Now I am thinking of him daily again, the father I loved and admired, the father I raged against, whose judgments I railed against, one of the men—my life is filled with such beloved, powerful, endearing, at times intimidating men—who influenced me in immutable ways.

But it is not only my aging, of course. For many years he's been back and forth, out of sight and mind, then suddenly shouting and lecturing again, whispering love, singing old Russian lullabies and union songs, igniting my nightmares and my dreams: he's been alive all these years, huddled in an abandoned empty room, and I have neglected him, forgotten him, wreaking punishment, managing escape; or he is weeping those old prolific Russian tears, sobbing into his large, strong, heavy-knuckled, pale, beautiful hands; or he is smiling tolerantly at me after a battle about my current boyfriend, or a principle of political reality I have failed to grasp, the warmth and unashamed vulnerability of his being revealed as he pulls me to him, calling me "Baby," or *Ketseleh*, and we are both disarmed of our indignation and



righteousness. He mumbles something in Yiddish or Russian. I can hear him laugh.

Not long ago I Googled him.

Imagine if he read this line. He'd think his crazy daughter had finally gone truly mad—he who died before telephone answering machines, television remotes, cell phones, computers of all kinds with their mysterious, industrious engines. Yet there he was, in Wikipedia, leading a strike in Baltimore with his old pal Joe Carlson.

So the voice comes. For now.

## Notes

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### PROLOGUE

Epigraph: Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, edited by William Zinsser (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995); © Toni Morrison.

- 1 The Brotherhood-Sister Sol, an organization serving the needs of children and youth in New York City.
- 2 Jane Lazarre, “Forgiveness,” a story in the *Village Voice*, May 19, 1975.

### CHAPTER 1

Epigraph: Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); © 1999 Patricia Hampl.

### CHAPTER 3

Epigraph: Langston Hughes, “I, Too, Sing America,” in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994). © 1994 Estate of Langston Hughes.