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Essay by Ellen Prentiss Campbell

A Therapist's Intuition Uncovers Hidden History



In 2003, I disregarded the “No Trespassing” sign posted by the entrance. I walked up the drive to the Bedford Springs Hotel, climbed the stairs—careful to avoid the most rotten risers—and peered in the dirty windows along the long colonnaded porch.

This was not the way I remembered it. The hotel had already been in decline more than three decades earlier in 1968, when my parents bought the old farm nearby that became our summer home, but it seemed grand to me. A young teenager then, I never knew the hotel in its prime. Our family vacations were times of swimming, berry picking, and reading; the once-renowned resort might have been in another country.

Now, the windows were too cloudy to see inside. I walked back down the sagging steps and crossed the road to the stream, remembering my last visit during the summer of 1984. My husband and I had come from Boston with our two-year-old daughter for a vacation on the farm. My parents had told us the Pittsburgh Symphony was at the Springs, and we attended an outdoor concert. It was a perfect summer evening of fireflies and stars—my daughter wore a crisp

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cotton dress; I held her on my lap as Barry Tuckwell played a Mozart horn concerto in a meadow beside a stream.

There had been a buzz that night about the Springs becoming the summer home for the symphony—Tanglewood in Pennsylvania. But the following spring, the creek flooded, inundating the meadow, washing parked cars away, closing down the hotel.

And yet, the melancholy ruin continued to haunt me, even back in my snug farmhouse retreat, at my laptop, working on a story. By 2003, much had been washed away and changed for me, too, since 9/11 and the deaths of my elderly parents. I'd begun writing fiction, impelled to tell stories, while continuing to practice psychotherapy, where I listened to stories. As I started looking into the hotel's history, especially a surprising chapter during World War Two, the many ways that personal histories and identities are revealed took on new meaning for me.

I've been a therapist for decades, which has no doubt fueled my need for privacy and reticence about telling other people's stories. But I'm also used to listening for the unspoken, listening with what therapists sometimes call the third ear. By ethical imperative, a therapist's role is to hold in strictest confidence the stories of others; a writer's role is to tell stories. The two principles may seem to be in conflict, but for me, it has provided a stimulating, provocative counterbalance. Empathy, integrity, and intuition are required for both.

Still, I keep a strict firewall between my two careers, practicing as a therapist using one name, writing under another. As therapist, I hold close every story ever told to me. As author, I present stories to the world—imagined, but infused and informed by my lifetime experience as a person as well as therapist. And now, my long journey back into the history of the Bedford Springs Hotel underscores the many choices a storyteller makes, consciously and unconsciously: tell it as it is, tell it slant, make it up, make it real.



After peering through the hotel's dirty windows, I visited the Bedford County Historical Society. In reading through back

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issues of the *Bedford Gazette*, I discovered that in the summer of 1945, the hotel had served as unlikely detainment center for the Japanese ambassador to Germany, his staff, and their families. The newspaper stories noted that some Japanese diplomats had European wives, and these couples had had children. Mixed-race enemy children—how doubly, triply alienating in wartime Bedford.

World War Two was already much on my mind. I'd been reading my father's wartime letters to my mother, written in the months before he was almost mortally wounded in the Battle of the Bulge during the bitter cold January of 1945. He didn't reveal much, except for his love. That came through in every line:

Some things seem to make me more aware of that longing for you which is always present.... Tonight it was the sunset... I wanted to reach out and hold on to the last bit of sunlight, which somehow was linked with you.

My own questions of love, loss, peace, and war merged with what I learned about the hotel. Soon after my first visit to the Bedford Historical Society, I had an idea for a story or novella. The glimmer grew over the next ten years into my debut historical novel *The Bowl with Gold Seams* (Apprentice House Press, 2016). And in a strange parallel process, as I worked on the novel, the hotel was restored, reopening in 2007.

The story is told by a fictional young Quaker woman, Hazel Shaw, whose husband is missing in action in the Pacific Theater. Hazel works at the Bedford Springs Hotel and becomes close to one of the families: Takeo Harada, a Japanese diplomat; his British wife Gwendolyn; and their thirteen-year-old daughter Charlotte. Hazel is drawn into the Harada family's complicated political and personal dilemma, worrying about Charlotte's future at war's end, when the Japanese are slated for deportation.

I continued my research at the National Archives, reading through boxes of declassified State Department correspondence and documents. My brother Don Campbell, a writer and film producer specializing in historical documentaries, asked me, "Are you interviewing people?"

No, I was not. I told Don, my aim was to be true to life, but I chose not to seek out interviewees. I was writing a novel, not history. I'm on the shy side, more at ease with my nose in a book, my hand on a pen, than with cold-calling strangers. And I felt wary of exposing my project to the light too soon; I neither wanted to appropriate the lives of real people nor to have my imaginative work directed by others.

Also, I didn't want to have to fabricate disclaimers, to change names to protect the innocent. I needed freedom to take necessary liberties for narrative integrity. For example, there is no mention of an English woman among the European diplomatic spouses in any of the documents, but I needed the Harada family's primary language to be English, and so (by authorial decree) Takeo Harada's wife must be Gwendolyn, not Frieda. Spare, suggestive documentary information for me was enough—indeed, was just right.

But sometimes life does imitate art. My novel opens with a chance encounter between Hazel and Charlotte, forty years after the war. A few months after the publication of my book, I opened my email one morning and found this message from a stranger:

While surfing the Web today, I came across the book reviews of your book. This seems to be very weird, but I just wanted you to know that I was one of the children interned at the Bedford Springs Hotel in 1945. My father was a Japanese diplomat, and my mother was French. I was ten years old.

Now Charlotte—not my Charlotte, but almost my Charlotte—had found *me*. I replied immediately and, as emails volleyed back and forth, uncovered another connection. Thirty years before, we'd briefly lived around the corner from each other in suburban Maryland, and now we still just lived a few miles apart.

Mitsouko sent me the manuscript of her own just-completed memoir. I read it as she read my book. Her life, the "true

story,” is richer than I ever could imagine or, had I known it, contain between covers. But I'd still imaginatively evoked at least some of her lived and emotional experience.

Within ten days of receiving Mitsouko's first email, I approached her door, a bouquet of autumn flowers, yellow spider dahlias, and bronze chrysanthemums gripped in my hand. Coincidentally—or not—the lobby of her apartment building was decorated in a Japanese style. I was nervous. Would she in some way feel that I had trespassed, overstepped the bounds, appropriated her story?

Mitsouko welcomed me to her light and airy apartment, smiling. She wore her white hair short; her casual slacks and blouse were simple but elegant. She placed my flowers in a glass vase on her dining room table beside the sliding doors to the balcony. She offered me water or wine, but we were both too excited to be thirsty.

We sat together on her couch, and she opened her family albums, leafing through the pages, telling her story. Black-and-white photographs captured moments in time. Snow glistened in her pictures, mounds of snow around the castle in Silesia where the Japanese diplomats and families were held during January 1945. It had been bitterly cold that year, she recalled—and I knew that, even before she told me. Again, our lives had overlapped in the ether. She'd not been far from the forest of the Ardennes, where my father had been shivering, too.



She turned the pages to her time at the Springs. She remembered sitting in the lobby, waiting for the Sunday funny papers—I had never imagined Charlotte could have done that, though I'd made sure Hazel brought her books. Finally, Mitsouko came to the last pages, the post-war years in Japan—years I'd spared Charlotte. Mitsouko is an American citizen now; after the post-war years of hunger and hardship, she has never been back to Japan.

But she has been back to the Springs twice. The first time, she told me, she went to the closed, deteriorating hotel and peered in, just as I had. She also said she'd visited more recently at the hotel's invitation, after it had been reopened.

Perhaps we could go back again together, I suggested.

She sighed. "It seems so far. I am eighty, you know."

If I could imagine Charlotte grown into the wisdom and experience of age, she would be Mitsouko. And the morning after our first visit, I received her email: *Your personality is exactly as I had pictured.*

Excerpt from *The Bowl with Gold Seams*

Charlotte ran up to us, dressed like an English schoolgirl in her too-short gray pleated skirt and blue blouse with a scalloped white collar. But I had never seen her look more Japanese, more like her father. Her features were sharper than his, but there was the same still resignation. Her face did not look like a child's today.

"I left the books in my room for you," she said.

"You could have kept mine."

"They'd only take them away from me."

"I brought something for you," I said.

Her mother looked at me sharply.

"Bird scissors," I said.

"A heron," Charlotte said, delighted. "They're small. I'll hide them so no one can take them."

I began to cry.

"My father says, the eyes of a daughter of the samurai must never be wet," she said. "Don't cry. You can't see me if you cry. Wave when I go," she said—suddenly fierce. "Wave till I am out of sight. The Japanese way."

She hugged me then, hard and impetuously. I held her. She felt small in my arms, like a bird.

Art Information

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Ellen Prentiss Campbell is the author of [The Bowl with Gold Seams](#) [6] (Apprentice House Press), her 2016 debut novel. Her short story collection *Contents Under Pressure* (Broadkill River Press) was a 2015 National Book Award nominee. Her essays and reviews appear in the *Fiction Writers Review*, where she is a

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For more information, visit [Ellen Prentiss Campbell's website](#) [7].

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