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## BOOKSHELF

# 'Finding My Father' Review: The Lies He Lived By

She grew up rapt by her father's charming tales of family life in the old country. The reality, she later learned, was darker than he admitted.



Warsaw.

PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE

*By Diane Cole*

Dec. 28, 2020 5:55 pm ET



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Thirty years ago, I became hooked on the work of socio-linguist Deborah Tannen after reading her smart, savvy, relationship-saving (yup, my husband read it, too) bestseller “You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation.” Here, and in Ms. Tannen’s many books since then, she displays an acute ability to decode and explain the hidden messages and assumptions our words unwittingly convey, whether about power, status, a wish for greater connection or its opposite. If there is a common lesson in all her volumes (among them, “I Only Say This Because I Love You” and “You’re the Only One I Can Tell”), it’s the importance of listening—and learning how to tune in to what’s really being said.

Now, in her appealing memoir “Finding My Father: His Century-Long Journey From World War I Warsaw and My Quest to Follow,” Ms. Tannen reveals how she acquired this skill, courtesy of her adored father, Eli Samuel Tannen:

When I was a child, and the family gathered after guests left, my father would comment, “Did you notice when she said . . . ?” and go on to explain what meaning he gleaned from the guest’s tone of voice, intonation, or wording. So I trace to him what became my life’s work: observing and explaining how subtle differences in ways of speaking can lead to frustration and misunderstandings between New Yorkers and Californians, women and men, and people of different ages, regions, or cultures.

Over the course of his long life—he died in 2006, at the age of 97—Eli loved nothing more than to reminisce, especially about his earliest years in Warsaw, where he was born into a large Hasidic family. He left that world behind when he came to America in 1920, but he never stopped missing it. His oft-repeated tales made his wife, Dorothy—Ms. Tannen’s mother—roll her eyes at what she dismissed as tedious stories about dead people. For her part, Dorothy remembered almost nothing about her childhood in what is now Belarus, from which she and her family had escaped in 1923. Why look back on a place that, had they stayed, would have probably cost them their lives in the Holocaust?

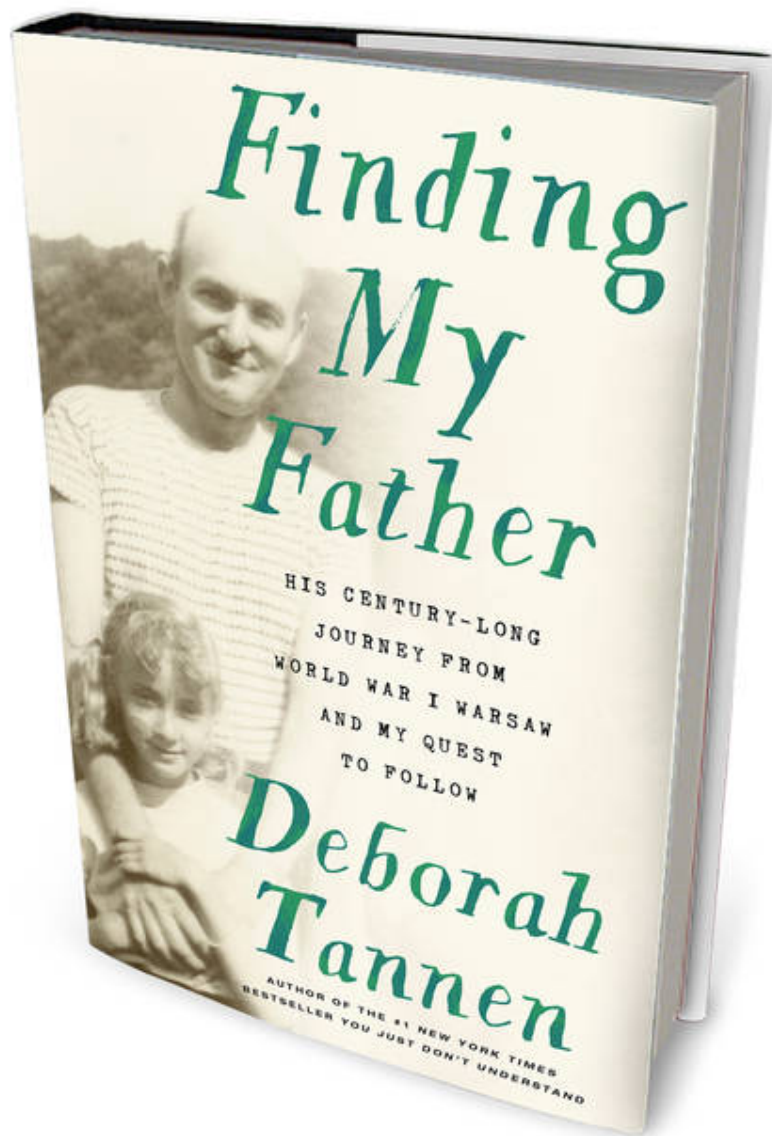


PHOTO: WSJ

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## FINDING MY FATHER

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By Deborah Tannen  
*Ballantine, 251 pages, \$28*

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The author's parents on their wedding day.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF DEBORAH TANNEN

But young Deborah loved her father's tales, many of which resembled scenes ripped from an Isaac Bashevis Singer story. She was captivated by Eli's detailed memories of the tightly knit Jewish community where he spent his first 12 years. The poverty was visceral in a neighborhood teeming with bow-legged children suffering from rickets, and shoeless beggars wearing clothes made from rags. Yet Eli felt sustained by the sheer liveliness of his grandfather's multigenerational household, where the boy lived with his widowed mother and only sister, surrounded by aunts, uncles and cousins of all ages.

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Many of these relatives had remarkable stories of their own. Aunt Magda, for instance, having early in her life eschewed religion for communism, fought with the Soviets in World War II and afterward became a high-ranking official in the Polish government. Aunt Dora's brilliance led her to a career as a respected mathematician and physicist who studied with Einstein, became his lover and, even after aborting her pregnancy by him, followed him from Europe to Princeton, N.J.

Eli's own life took a different course. Despite high aptitude scores at his American public school, he dropped out at 14. He spent the next three decades struggling to make a decent living, first to support his widowed mother and his sister, and then his wife and children. In those years he notched up 68 jobs and occupations, from garment worker to prison guard, while also going to night school, eventually earning a law degree before finally opening his own law office in the 1950s. When he retired from his law practice in the late '70s, he began writing down and recording his memories on tape, so that Ms. Tannen might someday write a book about him. Here, at last, is that book.

In her overly discursive early chapters, Ms. Tannen herself wonders why it took so long. To be sure, it was a daunting task to sift through the countless letters, notes and personal journals Eli had preserved over the course of his long life. But perhaps there was a deeper obstacle. In reconstructing the substance of her father's life, the author admits that she was also forced to revise what she thought she knew about her parents, both as individuals and as a couple.

The first family myth to fall was the intimate setting of his grandfather's Warsaw household. Instead, Eli's letters reveal Aunt Magda admonishing her nephew for waxing nostalgic about a family warmth that never existed. Unable to rebut a truth he had preferred not to acknowledge, Eli admits to his idealized childhood image and owns up to the lack of family closeness he himself had so painfully observed, experienced—and, it seems, repressed.

More eye-opening for Ms. Tannen is the dismantling of her own long-held notion that, instead of marrying Dorothy, Eli should have married his "other girlfriend," a woman who had always struck Ms. Tannen, from her father's stories, as more compatible with him than her mother was. But after the author reads between the lines of his lengthy correspondence with this other woman, Ms. Tannen arrives at a different conclusion: that Dorothy was, indeed, the right choice, the wife able to give Eli the family warmth and kindness he always yearned for.

I wish Ms. Tannen—and her book—had arrived at this knowledge in fewer pages, but the ultimate recognition of her father’s painful need for connection is searing, the depiction of the Jewish community in World War I-era Warsaw riveting. Not only does Ms. Tannen’s heartfelt portrait keep her father—and his memories—alive, but her story also hints at the undiscovered currents that may await us, too, if we but delve beneath the surface of our own family myths.

*Ms. Cole is the author of the memoir “After Great Pain: A New Life Emerges.”*

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