

**Q&A with Shirley Russak Wachtel, author of
THE BAKER OF LOST MEMORIES
(Little A; April 8, 2025)**

1. What did your journey to publication look like?

Getting published was a long and arduous process. I have been writing stories and poems ever since I was a child, really. Once I graduated college, I turned to journalism, writing freelance articles for local newspapers and even running a paper in Brooklyn as editor-in-chief. But I needed more; I needed to let my creative juices flow. All my life, characters and their stories have been calling to me and I needed to answer that call. So when I began my career as a college professor and had published a few children's books, I took on the project of getting my novels published. I did not want my manuscripts to languish in a desk drawer! It was before computers were an integral part of every household, so I became a frequent visitor to the post office, sending hundreds of queries to agents and publishers. Most never responded, but a few did offer some valuable suggestions. Eventually, a friend introduced me to an agent who praised my work, but after ten years, I still had not found success. One lucky day, through my son, I was put in touch with my current agent at WME, Eve Attermann, who saw the potential. Through Eve, my first manuscript, *A Castle In Brooklyn*, reached an outstanding editor at Little A, Carmen Johnson, and that's how I became a published author! Was it worth it? You bet. I always had the confidence, never stopped writing, and finally had the people who could make my dream come true.

2. What inspired you to write THE BAKER OF LOST MEMORIES?

As a daughter of Holocaust survivors, I have heard many tales of loss, trauma, and even heroism. These stories inspire me not only in the way I live my life, but also in the topics I take on as a writer. In *A Castle In Brooklyn*, I explore the lives of survivors and their dreams. We follow Jacob as he persistently works to make his dream of building a home a reality. Yet, he remains emotionally crippled by his experiences during the Holocaust and unable to handle a life-changing crisis when it occurs. In **THE BAKER OF LOST MEMORIES**, I turn to the story of a child of someone in my generation—the second generation—who carries her parents' trauma throughout her life. The loss of someone she never knew shapes the choices Lena makes as a child and as a young woman. It is only when she comes to terms with this loss and with her parents that she finds true happiness. The experiences of our parents and the resounding effects on the next generation are what make this story compelling.

3. How much of your own life experience is in THE BAKER OF LOST MEMORIES?

As with all my writing, aspects of my own experiences are evident. Like Lena, I am a child of Holocaust survivors who was born in Brooklyn. However, while Lena's parents

find it difficult to speak of their trauma, my parents often freely discussed their closeknit families in Poland and their devastating losses.

My mother and two brothers were the only survivors in a family of eight, while my father was the only survivor, his mother, two sisters and a brother having died in the fires of Auschwitz. He was a runner in the black market in the Lodz ghetto, just like Josef in **THE BAKER OF LOST MEMORIES**. In researching the book, consequently, I was satisfying my own curiosity about his experience.

I came upon the idea of a bakery because I thought it was a good setting to span the past with the present; but I also recall that my mother told me of an aunt, Tante Rachel, who owned a bakery in Poland and how she often assisted her there. As a child, I was obsessed with learning all I could about my grandparents, the aunts, uncles and cousins I never knew. I have only a few photos of them, none of my grandparents. As my younger brother and I were born after World War II, I couldn't imagine how I would feel if I had had a sibling who was murdered by the Nazis. Although it was emotionally difficult for me to write, I wanted to explore this idea with Lena and how such a loss might have affected her life so many years later.

Other aspects of the novel also stem from my life. The bungalow colony which appears in the introduction is drawn from my memories of visiting my aunt and uncle in the Catskills and babysitting my younger cousins there. Some Brooklyn scenes including Lena's visit to Doc's, a real place from my childhood where we would order egg creams and Rock and Root root beer sodas in frozen glasses; walking to the library, going to the Loews Theater, and taking early morning classes at Brooklyn College are all fond memories. One interesting note is Lena's meeting with Luke on the bus. I did have the same meeting with a charismatic student who was not my usual type. However, unlike Lena, I did not give him my real telephone number. I have often wondered what would have happened if I had. With Lena, I was able to find out.

4. Can you describe your writing process?

I begin with a nugget of an idea, usually just before I drift off to sleep. And then, often the next morning, I write it down on a notepad next to my bed. With **THE BAKER OF LOST MEMORIES**, I knew I wanted to tell the story of the devastating impact a parent's experience can have on a child, even years later. I then create an introduction which will compel the reader to want to know more. In this case, it is Pearl's shocking abduction by a bear. I have a vague idea of a flashback and a return to the present. And I knew that I wanted to represent two points of view in telling the story, Lena's and her mother, Anya's. Oddly enough, I begin thinking about how I want the novel to end, a last line, something that will bring about a satisfying resolution so that the story will stay with the reader after the book is read. And then I write. My method is also a bit unusual as I write three pages a day in longhand. I believe that my brain connects more easily to the words and I am not hindered by a screen or keyboard, if that makes sense. I edit my words after completing each chapter, type the chapter and revise again. Then I begin the process all over again. As my novels are character-based, I do not write detailed plot

outlines, but rather allow the characters to lead me through the various scenes. Sometimes even I am surprised by the results. Of course, research is essential, and I spent many hours reading the history of the Lodz ghetto, the concentration camps, the bakery business, and kidney disease, along with interviews. With this novel, I explored magical realism which was a joy to write. Whether it is really magic or there is a logical explanation for what happens is up to the reader.

5. What advice do you have for new writers?

Never give up! I am a good example of someone who has continued to write despite the challenges of getting published. If I am being honest, I had no choice. Since I was very young, I have felt compelled to write down my thoughts, my dreams, my fears—and later, to give voice to those feelings through characters. Reading is also important as it can inspire you. I try to read a classic, a work of non-fiction, and a fictional bestseller every few weeks. For example, I recently read *Marjorie Morningstar*, *Eleanor*, and *The Love Elixir of Augusta Stern*. Also, make sure to write every day, even if only for a few minutes, even if you doubt your voice. I can assure you that the more you write, the more proficient you will become. And you will feel good about yourself. Once you have completed a manuscript, and have revised it, send it off to family, friends and teachers for comments. Then dive into the publishing world and be persistent. Finally, never forget that you are a writer. I always was and I continue to be.