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— Hedi Azus

Based on a true story



Hedi Azus, left, flips through old photo albums with writer Loren Stephens at the Azus home in West Los Angeles. Both Hedi and her husband, Al, have left written memoirs so future generations will know the stories of their lives.

Personal memoirs tell tales that family, friends can learn from, cherish

By **Senna Abram**
Staff Writer

At 86, Hedi Azus takes comfort in the words that will live on long after she is gone. The sentences, strung together within bound pages, will speak to the family she leaves behind. "I have five grandchildren, and I wanted them to know what their grandmother had done, how my life had started," Azus said. "I did it to live my life over."

In an era of disposable gadgets, gift cards and plastic cash, Azus gave her grandchildren the story of her life. She is one of millions of Americans paying professional writers to help them preserve their memoirs to be passed down through the generations.

"When something is in print, it takes on a different meaning than when someone tells a story," said Loren Stephens, a former documentary filmmaker who helped Azus write and publish her book, titled "The Music of



My Life."

"A book is a real keepsake you can have forever."

Stephens, who spent years researching and writing documentaries about the cultures and customs of people in Mexico, stepped into the

"I go back in this book every once in a while," Hedi Azus said of her memoir project. "Your life is right there in the pages, all at once, from beginning to end."

world of memoir writing when she discovered an extraordinary story in her own mother, Carol Rubin Meyer.

Meyer, a New York socialite, studied opera after graduating from Smith

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Memoirs show everyone has a story

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College. After the death of her husband, Seymour, Meyer went back to college at the age of 52 and became an expert in pre-Columbian art. She became one of the founding members of the Society of Women Geographers, traveling to more than 40 countries.

While writing her mother's story, Stephens said there were times when she was surprised by her mother's revelations about love and loss, the Great Depression and her relationships with her own mother.

Stephens spent hours tape-recording her mother's stories. When she had finished, her mother titled the book "I Turn a Key and the Birds Began to Sing," a metaphor for her own life.

"It's so fascinating how memories work," Stephens said. "We can all relate to frustration, to love and hate."

Stephens turned her experience into a profession, creating writewisdom.com, which offers pointers to those interested in having

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— Loren Stephens, who helped Azus write and publish her book titled

their stories told.

She came upon Hedi and Al Azus, who have been instrumental in forming a foundation at the Jewish Home for the Aging in Reseda. A garden there is named for the couple, who live in West Los Angeles.

"Some of it is challenging because people want to be seen as nice and good," Stephens said of the work as a memoir writer. "Sometimes, I have to pick a little to get to the stories. In each case, I try to draw out the person's philosophy of life. I try to find what has been meaningful for them and what they want people to remember them for."

Those who publish memoirs say their books are not meant for a wide audience. The memoirs are published

privately, with as few as five printed copies or as many as 200. And the mostly hardback covers can be elaborate, complete with commissioned artwork and photographs.

Memoir writers or personal historians are for the most part ghostwriters. Their profession has grown, according to Association of Personal Historians. The international group formed in 1995 with 15 members. Membership has grown to 540.

"It's a new movement driven by the baby boom generation," said Lettice Stuart, president of the Web-based association.

Stuart, who grew up in the South, said she remembers a time when children would sit on porches and

listen to parents talk about their lives.

But with baby boomers leaving home for college and drifting far from the communities where they grew up, there has been a growing interest among them to preserve their parents' stories.

"We've become a mobile society," Stuart said. "Now that our parents are dying very quickly, the baby boomer generation is saying, 'Oh my God, I want that story.'"

Though some write their own memoirs, others pay professionals up to \$30,000, including the cost of a modest print run.

"I do books because I think the older generation of today do not relate to CDs or DVD," she said.

With the onslaught of celebrity memoirs cluttering the publishing industry, Stuart believes people are finding that their own lives can be fascinating to their own families.

"Because I'm 59 now, I'm beginning to think about my story," Stuart said. "It's a gift of a lifetime. It's a great closer in life, a powerful thing."

Everyone has a story of their family."

As for Azus, both she and her husband, Al, have written their memoirs.

Sometimes, Azus likes to pull her book down from the shelf, to reread her life and glance at the photographs. She was born in Germany, but grew up in New York. When she was 16, her mother sent her to work in the garment district, where she became a high fashion model. She later married her first husband, who went off to fight in World War II.

Hedi Azus said music played a part in all the turning points of her life, both the highs and lows.

"I go back in this book every once in a while," she said. "Your life is right there in the pages, all at once, from beginning to end."

"Mine was a simple life, really. But it was a time when my grandchildren will never realize what it was like to pay 5 cents for an ice cream cone."

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