

Memory in Photograph

George Baldini

HIS 142

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This picture I chose shows my late grandmother, Dorothy Baldini (“Gogo”), and her grandfather, Richard Bolles, walking down Commonwealth Avenue in Boston on Easter Day, 1936. My grandmother has the same determined and confident look that she had when I knew her. Her grandfather has a more despondent and pensive appearance. In a previous essay assignment, we had to find an old family photograph and were tasked to learn more about the ancestors pictured, along with the time and place where the photo was taken. By using census data, historic newspaper research, and information from class lectures, I gained a better understanding of where my grandmother got her distinct look and personality – her resolute attitude was a hallmark of her ancestors. However, I wondered if there is any meaning behind her grandfather’s look. I was also interested in learning more about the Easter Day Parade, as this event no longer exists today. At that time, Boston’s Commonwealth Avenue was still relatively new and had become one of the most popular and fashionable streets in Boston. From historical newspaper research, class lectures, and course readings, I sought to connect the dots to tell a more complete and contextual story regarding this photograph.

I chose the *Boston Globe* because it was and still is the most widely read Boston newspaper. My grandmother had also said that this photograph had been published in the *Globe*, although I was not able to find that specific issue. To look through the *Boston Globe* archives, one must enter a search term and select a date range. The search returns headlines, whose articles contain the search keywords. Unfortunately, I was not able to leaf through full issues of daily newspapers. Instead, I searched for “Easter Day Parade,” “fashion,” “Europe,” “fireside chats,” among other terms, to contextualize the photograph with more knowledge about the event itself, as well as details of the political and economic climate at the time. All the articles that I found helpful are listed in the bibliography.

I noticed patterns of articles focusing on retail and consumer trends, as well as a smaller number noting the growing instability in Europe. The Easter Day Parade was an elaborate fashion show down Commonwealth Avenue with men in their stylish suits and women in their elaborate and colorful dresses. When I searched for fashion in the *Globe*, I was surprised to find out not only how many retail advertisements there were for clothing, but also how few ads there were for other types of business. When trying to learn about the international, specifically European, affairs at the time, I found a few articles about the conflicts sprouting in Germany, Turkey, and Italy. However, these articles all appeared in the back pages of the newspaper, so I assumed these issues weren't yet a major concern to most readers. Americans were not anticipating another international conflict, so perhaps they viewed these articles' subject material as a European problem that the respective countries would resolve on their own. It was interesting to note that there was no assumption that these conflicts would escalate into a second world war, and that the US would be directly involved within less than five years.

In the years leading up to Easter Day, 1936, my grandmother and her grandfather had lived through the Great Depression. I thought there was an interesting contrast between an economy that was still in the early stages of recovery at that time and a parade dedicated to showing off fancy, expensive clothes. Furthermore, while the American economy was beginning to improve, I didn't expect there to already be such intense media coverage and fervent public interest regarding this material-focused event. The Great Depression had a lasting impact on my grandmother. Gogo was one of the most frugal and practical people I have ever met. In the upstairs linen closet of her house, you could find an old shoe box filled with cracked bars of soap and half-empty bottles of shampoo that were nearly as old as my father. She had been a late and reluctant adopter of the toaster oven, microwave, and electric garage door opener. The cell phone

her children had insisted on could be found uncharged under a pile of outdated maps in her glove compartment. Her relationship with the television remote swung unpredictably between tolerance and complete frustration. She considered them all unnecessary – signs not of progress but of moral decay.

In the latter years of the Great Depression, focus turned inward on the country. Spurred by the New Deal to help create jobs and establish economic security, purchasing power increased, and Americans experienced a recovery in confidence.¹ In his calm, personal, and sincere fireside chats, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt reassured the American people with hope for a peaceful and brighter future. Just eighteen years earlier, the US had signed peace treaties for “the war to end all wars.” International affairs and the prospect of another military conflict were in the back of all minds, as the country adopted an isolationist ideology and the new slogan “America First.” However, at the same time, while attention was directed towards reviving the domestic economy, tensions in Europe were rising.

One event that exemplifies this focus on American society and blind eye toward Europe was Boston’s Easter Day Parade. Stemming from a New York tradition, the Easter Day Parade evolved from solely a religious event in the 1880s into a fashion parade showcasing style, taste, abundance, and novelty.² In 1936, after an Easter Day mass at the Trinity and Emmanuel Churches in the Back Bay, upper class parishioners paraded down the new and popular Commonwealth Ave in front of a large crowd flaunting “gay and colorful attire far and wide throughout the city as if to make amends for one of the bleakest and most dismal Aprils on record.”³

¹ R.L.B., “Wall Street Pleased with the Recovery: Spending Finally Came to Important Lines.”

² Morrill, *Easter, Passover, and Other Spring Festivals*, 91.

³ “Text of F.D.’s Fireside Chat Explaining Spending Plan.”

This event revolved around fashion. During Christmas time, clothing ads flooded the newspaper to prepare for the parade. By 1900, the parade was as important in retailing as the Christmas season is today and, by the mid-20th century, the parade's religious aspects had faded and it was mostly seen as a demonstration of American prosperity. Even during the Great Depression, families still found ways to retain the high level of style at the parade. Because of the prominence and tradition of this event, many families would save up for Christmas time, when individuals typically purchased their Easter Day attire. I wondered if my grandmother received her dress every Christmas and also if this routine stuck with her throughout the rest of her life; my mother and sister always received stylish clothing and accessories from her for the holiday. Another option, which was typical of the Great Depression years, was to take more of a "fixer-upper" approach. One advertisement offered a way to avoid buying "an entire ensemble" by putting together a fancy outfit "without delving too deeply into the savings account." By mixing and matching features of different, more common and affordable outfits, the article encouraged Bostonians to "make it yourself and put the money you save toward accessories."⁴

However, while Bostonians were consumed with the peacefulness, elegance, and merriment of the parade, the seeds of another world war were being sewn in Europe. One easy to miss article commented on the rise of fascism overseas. Located on page 12 towards the back of the *Boston Globe* on April 12, 1936, the article, "Italy's Threat Gives Powers New Concern," recounted the highlights of the Locarno Conference and provided updates on the status of other European countries. At the Conference, an Italian representative asked the League of Nations "whether the presence of Italy is desired here, and whether her collaboration in the work of

⁴ Barbara Bell, "Fashion's Outlook for Easter Colorful and Gay," *Boston Globe*.

European reconstruction is wanted.”⁵ The League of Nations essentially responded no, which would prove fateful, as Italy ended up joining the Axis powers. The second half of the article touches on the escalation of tensions after Germany and Turkey had violated the Versailles and Lausanne Treaties by expanding their armies. The article was a fascinating glimpse into how the threat of war still lurked on the peripheries of pieces more concerned with discussing holidays and consumer culture.

My picture exemplifies the different ways in which the public’s attention was oriented. As a ten-year-old, Gogo was excited to participate in the fashion parade alongside her grandfather, wearing her favorite holiday dress and coat, and trying to match Richard’s serious demeanor. In the photo, her grandfather has a stern look on his face. It was a cold day,⁶ but perhaps he and his generation were reading the back pages of the newspaper and thinking about the instability of agreements of World War I, the building political tension in Europe, and the serious consequences it might bring. The juxtaposition of this grand fashion parade with Gogo’s grandfather’s look exemplifies this larger mindset of the country. Few had the ability or desire to see what was happening across the Atlantic. FDR, like most Americans, was not eager for the US to enter another global military conflict. But unlike the ardent isolationists, he also realized America’s involvement was inevitable. As noted in the preface of Paul Fussell’s *The Boys’ Crusade*, a few of the nation’s leaders, particularly FDR and Eisenhower, had the foresight of war that the American people lacked. FDR knew that the public would not support going to war unless something major and tragic happened. The slaughter World War I and its toll on veterans were also still fresh in people’s minds. Americans weren’t focused on preparing for war, even

⁵ “Italy’s Threat Gives Powers New Concern: Eden Has Till Thursday to Ask Compromise by Hitler – Turkish Demand to Fortify Straits Complicates Situation,” *Boston Globe*.

⁶ “Boston’s Easter Fashion Parade Proves Brisk March: Throngs Watch Annual Show As Churchgoers Leave Back Bay Churches at Noon,” *Boston Globe*.

though it was only a few years away. Regardless of FDR's foresight and the industrial foundation laid by the new economy, the peacetime government still left the country underprepared for a major war. Soon enough, articles about Europe that in 1936 were relegated to the 12th page would soon move to the front and affect all those gathered at the Easter Day Parade.

This research project taught me much about my family's story. I learned about the tradition of Boston's Easter Day Parade, and through newspaper research and class lectures, I brought the grainy black and white picture to life. I now have a better idea about what was going through my ancestors' minds and how the larger context of national and international affairs shaped these types of experiences in their lives. However, the most notable takeaway I had from this project is the irony of events that followed in my grandmother's life. In this picture, Gogo was a 10-year-old girl focused intently on her role in an Easter Day Parade, too young to be concerned with the course of events evolving in Europe. Her naivety of international affairs would soon fade away, albeit for more personal reasons than most Americans. In her teenage years, she would date a young fellow named George Patton IV. At that time, her boyfriend's father, General George Patton, was busy commanding the US Seventh Army in the Mediterranean and Europe, at one point leading the allied invasion of Sicily and later helping to liberate Nazi Germany with his Third Army. While George IV would go on to West Point and have a decorated career of his own as an army general in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, Gogo would ultimately meet and marry a young doctor, Mario Baldini, who had emigrated to Boston after World War II on a Fulbright scholarship. He had spent his late-teenage and early twenties serving as a doctor in the Italian Royal Army – the same army that General Patton had fought,

from the same country that the League of Nations had rebuffed, as reported on the 12th page of the *Boston Globe*, the day after the Easter Day Parade of 1936.

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