



Memories In Red

A FAMILY'S HISTORY

BY BARRY TANENBAUM

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THERE ARE STORIES we tell to explain ourselves, to clarify who we are, and to account for why we are who we are. And no matter what the apparent subject of these stories, what they are always really about is the past. "The past is never dead," William Faulkner said. "It's not even past."

Yelena Zhavoronkova's personal project, *Memories in Red*, tells stories rich with detail and emotion about her family. Born in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), she's lived in the United States since 1990 and has worked as a graphic designer for over 20 years. She's currently studying photography at City College of San Francisco.

Memories in Red, she writes, is "a story about a little girl" and a "family like many others" in the Soviet Union of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Everything looks good from the outside, she says, but underneath is hidden the pain and confusion of constant lies and unanswered questions.

Yelena made the 22 images that comprise the *Memories* series over a period of a year and a half at a tabletop setup



▲ "This old bible, set in pre-reform Russian orthography, was the only book my grandma owned. She liked to drink tea with cubes of sugar, breaking them into smaller pieces with sugar cutters."



▲ "Dad would save every box from boxed chocolates. He used them to store documents, letters, and photographs. As they would lose their shape with time, he would mend their corners and use black rubber bands to hold the lid in place."



📌 "Red Pioneer Tie. First, you wash it. Then, you roll it into a towel to wring out as much water as possible. Finally, you iron it. Every day, before school."



Photos © Yelena Zhavoronkova Photography

📌 "My dad liked to peel an apple into his tea. This was his version of fruit flavored tea, long before we were introduced to the packets of various flavors."



CREATIVITY

PERSONAL PROJECT

♦ “Mom worked at the same plant for 40 years. It manufactured linotypes, the huge typography machines that were used to print newspapers. Upon her retirement, she requested to be made two custom type slugs, bearing the names of her grand kids. They are the last reminders of her long working career, along with a sole photograph of her and a colleague, with whom she worked side by side all those years.”



Photos © Yelena Zhavoronkova Photography

in the garage of her home. “The high ceiling made it the best location for moving the lights and the gobos and the reflectors,” she says. She used a Canon EOS 5D Mark II and an EF 24-70mm f/2.8L USM lens. The lighting, from first Dynalite, then Elinchrom strobe units, was a key factor in capturing the details of the images, and, more important, setting and maintaining the mood of the entire project.

“The important thing,” Yelena says, “was to control the light to create the dramatic look: what would be shadowed, what would be highlighted. I didn’t want natural light settings. I wanted to highlight pieces, portions of the settings, carefully choosing where I wanted to direct the viewer’s eye and attention, and then telling the story of why I was directing them that way.” It was a long process that began with sketches, then moved on to a lot of trials and takes.

She created the images, and wrote the words that accompany them, for her daughter and niece and nephew—“not for now, but for later.” Then, when the project



♦ “Dad always wanted to be an artist and drew all his life. While traveling, he would send us letters with small sketches—the green Caucasus Mountains seen from a window, a weirdly shaped water cup from a mineral resort, small details of a room. He would enlarge magazine reproductions of famous artworks onto canvas and paint them, little by little, with oils. Once, he let me add a stroke to one of his works. The painting is still with our family and I can spot the stroke right away.”

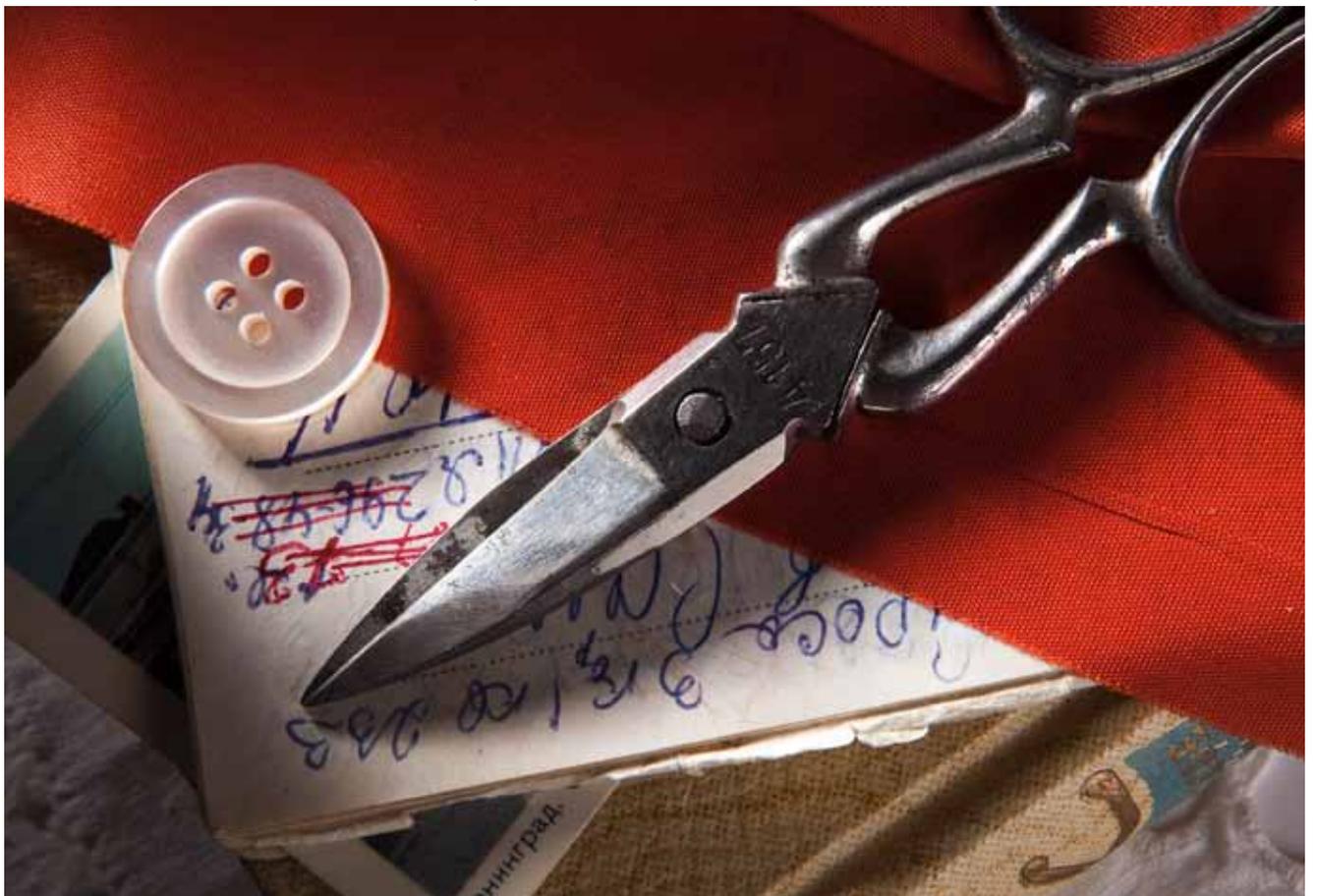
was completed, a wonderful thing happened: the images proved to have a reach and a resonance beyond her family. “People, when they look at my images, they start talking about their own childhoods,” she says. “It’s

a very rewarding process, showing my images to people from everywhere.” ■

All the photos in the Memories in Red series, and Yelena’s comments, are at www.photo.yzdesign.com.



▲ "Dad had to work in the military, which controlled every moment of his life. His proudest moments were on Victory Days, when he would take out a black leather folder and show my sister and I his medals. My favorite one was the sharp-cornered Order of the Red Star, which depicted a little figure of a soldier with a rifle. It had the third highest ranking in military orders and was awarded for military action. Dad was very proud of it, though he never told us what act he received it for—veterans didn't really like to talk about the war."



▲ "Tiny scissors, a cook book, a pocket calendar, a notebook with addresses of our relatives, and a button. A button from my mom's last cardigan."