(An)Archive

Childhood, Memory, and the Cold War

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Losing Balance[1]

Tatyana Kleyn

She joined the Roy C. Ketcham (RCK) High School Gymnastics Team as a 7th grader who was still in junior high. Little did she know this team would become her life and her family for the next six years. It would take her around the world from Hawaii to Italy and even China, as the first high school team of any sport to compete in the communist nation. But it was a meet in Lakeland High School, just 45 minutes from Poughkeepsie, New York, where her high school was located, that would become a turning moment in her life.

It was her junior year, so she had already spent four years on the team, with 15–20 other girls depending on the year. But this family—until that day—had one thing in common. They were winners, they won every meet, every time. It was the expectation and the norm. That was until the Lakeland meet, where the abstract concept of defeat became a reality, and a very bitter one at that. The announcement of the final score was nothing short of a shockwave that ran through the girls as they assembled their belongings by the bleachers. They didn't know how to lose, how to act, what to do. It brought them all to tears, with their coach, Mr. Ross, yelling, 'You can't do that. Get on the bus!'

This was possibly the first time she cried in public as a teenager. But she was not alone. The nearly 20 sobbing girls boarded the bus, as a team, in their red, white and blue uniforms (the school colors, not to be confused with those of the US flag) and eventually sat in silence for the rest of the ride home. Although nothing was said, the uncertainty of this new moment penetrated the yellow school bus with the most uncomfortable upright seats. How did this happen to us? Who are we now? Where do we go from here? The questions

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1   This is a childhood memory produced as part of the Reconnect/Recollect project discussed in the introduction to this book.

were to be answered, but one constant remained, the team—albeit cracked—
was still whole.

Photograph of Tatyana (back row, fifth from the left) with her gymnastics team
in Tiananmen Square. Beijing, China, 1989. From Tatyana Kleyn's family archive.