

## EVANS + SKOLLE

**I**n the fall of 2000, I came across several books on the famous photographer Walker Evans in a Parisian bookstore. I opened them and that was like opening an emotional Pandora's Box or discovering the invisible part of a family iceberg: from page to page there were portraits of my grands-parents, Lil (Élisabeth) and John, that I had never seen before, along with the detailed account of their lives, intertwined with Walker Evans' story. Even my mother, Anita, born in 1927 in New York, featured in those pages, both in text and photos. Suddenly, the ghosts of my departed kin appeared, captured in the shots taken by the great photographer.

In one of the books, published by Scalo for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, I read pages and pages on John, illustrated with pictures of my grand-parents. One of them struck me: they were sitting, grim-looking, on the gloomy terrace of their building on 14th Street; baby Anita, my own mother, in the arms of smiling Walker Evans who was, photographed by John (many of the pictures of Evans were taken by Skolle). The pictures were interspersed with a display of their ten-year correspondence.

I decided to get in touch with the authors of the publications, through which I had

found out so much about my family, and I soon received an e-mail from Jeff Rosenheim, curator of the Walker Evans Archives at the Metropolitan Museum of New York. He said "We've been looking for you for 10 years, hoping to find a descendant of that artist named Hanns/John Skolle who had been so involved in Walker Evans' life... Come to New York, we'll show you many documents about your family."

That particular stay in New York was like a bitter-sweet pilgrimage. In the offices of the Metropolitan Museum the Walker Evans archives were opened for me: the photographs, the letters from my grand-mother to Walker, in which she shares her thoughts, feelings and facts about John, Anita, about their holidays together near New Rochelle, Connecticut, about France (where Evans had stayed in 1926, hoping to become a... writer, his prime ambition). Displayed for me were also all the letters from John to his friend





*Walker. Hours of reading.*

*Then I was seated facing a wide-screen computer, I pressed a key and a cruel mosaic popped up instantly : a full array of pictures of my mother as a nude child after her bath, wearing a mischievous smile, photographed by Evans. Even through time and B&W old pictures, I was hit by her blue-green eyes, and all the more moved because she had passed away recently. I had known a Mom who did not seem fit for happiness, who was wearing a crown of sadness, whereas here was a happy little girl before Walker's lens. I began to cry, soon followed by Rosenheim who had lost his father the week before. Back and forth went the box of tissues, between the visitor from La Rochelle and the curator of the Walker Evans Archives ...*

*I had come to New York to touch faces and letters that had been dormant like hidden treasures and*

*that had been awaiting disclosure for my sake since 1935. But these were time-machines that I had triggered out of curiosity in a bookstore of rue de Rivoli, meant to produce nostalgia. Still, I must be grateful to Walker Evans and sheer coincidence for these instruments of memory, be it letters, negatives or digital discs, because people who are printed on them never really die.*

*The story would have ended at that point when, in 2007, I found out on the internet that documents about Lil were kept in the Virgil Thomson Papers at the Music Library of Yale University. My grand-mother was a musician and I was able to get letters she had written to, and received from, the composer (who had produced film scores). This complemented the batch of correspondence with Evans. Strangely enough, when I stayed in NYC in 2000 I also spent some time at Yale : I had no idea that elements of our story were also kept in one of the old buildings of the prestigious university, a few yards from me.*

*Philippe Skolle*