



Source: AFP, 'US grabs Iranian weapons bound for Taliban', *The Australian online*, 19/04/07.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [language](#), [evidence](#), [refugees](#)  
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There's this photo of them taken at about that time. I can't find the original, but I had made a slide of it.

I plug in the projector and turn it on. A small intense square of light appears on the wall behind my desk. I turn the lens, and gradually a greyish, ashy blob materialises in the square of light. I keep turning, and the image resolves itself, an even smaller, slightly uneven rectangle in the bright, white square. The projector is close to the wall, so the image is not much bigger than the original photograph had been. Like all photographs, it is different from the way I remembered it. I find myself experiencing a kind of shock as what I remember and what is recorded take a moment to coalesce.

My grandparents sit in the foreground, looking anxiously ill-at-ease, a demeanour which is reinforced by my grandfather's bulky, ill-fitting suit and the way in which the collar on my grandmother's cotton dress sits awry. They don't look like they belong to these clothes. They are not at home. Behind them, and between them, their son, my uncle, peers out awkwardly, his narrow shoulders engulfed by the collar of his sailor suit. The sense of awkwardness is reinforced by the way in which the image is framed. The little group does not occupy the centre of the picture, but has drifted to the left, so that my grandmother's right shoulder is amputated abruptly by the edge of the photograph.

I had always supposed that this was a picture taken for official purposes. Perhaps it is because it has none of the embellishments of a photographer's studio, no sense that it was a picture taken to mark an occasion of their choosing. The background is neutral, and there is a lack of depth to the image so that they all look strangely thrust forward, exposed before the probing flash of the camera. In the bottom right hand corner of the image is a fragment of a circular stamp with the letters 'R O M' clearly discernible; a fragment, I have always assumed, of the word 'Romania'.

Not that the papers they were travelling on at the time were official. My grandparents were bent on travelling west via any route that presented itself. Purchased illegally, his papers declared my grandfather to be first a Romanian businessman, and, when this profession proved to be inconvenient, a carpenter. When this picture was taken, he was engaged in the kind of sleight-of-hand familiar to all exiles, the constant remaking of himself to suit the needs and desires of those who had power over him.

I see now that the picture has been cut, or to be more precise, carefully torn, from what was once a larger photograph. On the obverse of the picture, there are five words written in Cyrillic, and, in another hand, a fragment of another word written in the Roman alphabet; it begins with the letters 'S E', but is broken off by the torn edge of the photograph. The two areas of text are divided from each other by a vertical line of small dots, like perforations, and in the bottom right hand corner, a fragment of what looks like a square stamp or border in which details might be entered by hand is visible. Below the words in Cyrillic, what I first took to be an ink-smudge is actually part of a faded stamp, with a word in the Roman alphabet in reverse. The last letters of this word are D E.

I know that I am recording all of this as though, through a painstaking act of scrutiny, I might be able to animate this image, to nudge its subjects out of their frozen immobility in time and between places. But this act of recording is also an act of compensation for what I cannot see, for what is missing. And there is something missing, an omission that transcends the absences which haunt all photographs. What is missing is my mother.

In the eighty or so years since this photograph was taken, I have seen it perhaps three times. On the first occasion, it was as a child. As I remember, it was already a fragment, torn off at about the level of my grandparents' chests. However, the photograph extended further to my grandmother's right, to include my mother, a little girl of about five with her dark hair in plaits hanging over her shoulders. I remember this particularly because my mother, with whom I was looking at it, was embarrassed by the likeness, which she thought was unflattering. The next time I saw it was in adulthood, and my mother had disappeared, taking my grandmother's right shoulder with her. By then, she had disappeared from life, too, dying suddenly and unexpectedly overseas.

I have no idea why she did it, for it could only have been her. She could not have envisaged the act of retrospective haunting her gesture would entail for me, but looking at it now, I am struck by something else. If this was a photograph taken for identity purposes, then it is an image about passing: passing as...passing through...passing out...passing away. In an ultimate act of self-determination, my mother has moved herself beyond the frame.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Anne Brennan.*