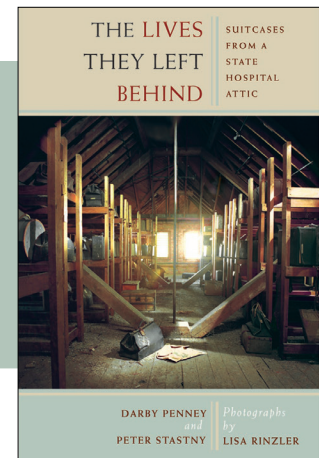




# The Lives They Left Behind: Suitcases from a State Hospital Attic

by Darby Penney and Peter Stastny, with photographs by Lisa Rinzler

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“*The Lives They Left Behind* is a deeply moving testament to the human side of mental illness, and of the narrow margin which so often separates the sane from the mad. It is a remarkable portrait, too, of the life of a psychiatric asylum—the sort of community in which, for better and for worse, hundreds of thousands of people lived out their lives. Darby Penney and Peter Stastny’s careful historical (almost archaeological) and biographical reconstructions give us unique insight into these lives which would otherwise be lost and, indeed, unimaginable to the rest of us.” —**Oliver Sacks**

## INTRODUCTION

Willard State Psychiatric Hospital, overlooking Seneca Lake in rural upstate New York, housed more than 54,000 people during its 126 years of operation. Some were released to their communities after decades of institutionalization, but many more died there. If not for the discovery of 400 suitcases filled with patients’ belongings in the hospital attic when the facility closed in 1995, their lives would have been lost to history. This discovery led the authors—a psychiatrist and an ex-patient advocate—to conduct a detailed study of the lives of the suitcase owners, to curate an exhibit at the New York State Museum in Albany that attracted more than 300,000 visitors, to speak to audiences across the country about the lives of the suitcase owners, and to write this book.

In *The Lives They Left Behind*, the contents of ten of these suitcases are skillfully examined and compared to the written record to create a moving and devastating group portrait of twentieth-century American psychiatric care. Richer, more complex lives than indicated by the hospital records emerge from a wide array of personal effects, including letters to loved ones, photographs of school chums and foreign travels, knickknacks, religious tracts, a christening gown, professional photographic equipment, and a delicate hand-painted bone china teacup and saucer. Here are gripping personal dramas of new immigrants and native-born Americans, men and women of different races and ethnicities, among them a young, dispossessed German nun, a Scottish nurse, a Filipino student, and an African-American World War II veteran. These people coped with a host of problems in times of war, economic hardship, and cultural dislocation. The confusion following displacement, the rage or despair resulting from illness, loss of loved ones, or sudden poverty, and the experience of hearing disembodied voices were only some of the misfortunes that put them on the path to institutionalization, from which most did not escape alive.

As it restores the humanity of the individuals it so poignantly evokes, *The Lives They Left Behind* reveals the vast historical inadequacies of a psychiatric system that has yet to heal itself.

## CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. *The Lives They Left Behind* includes long-lost personal artifacts and letters, as well as medical records, to piece together life stories of people who spent decades in institutions. In what ways do these sources complement each other? In what ways might they be at odds with each other?
2. The coauthors explore the history of Willard State Psychiatric Hospital in the context of 150 years of changing ideas about mental illness and its treatment. Did this history provide a grounding for a deeper understanding of the stories of individual suitcase owners? Why or why not?
3. Many of the people whose stories are examined in the book were immigrants. In what ways might cultural misunderstanding and miscommunication have contributed to the events that led up to their institutionalization? To their experiences in the hospital?



4. Madeline, the French intellectual whose story appears in Chapter 11, wrote the following: “The false is so mingled with the truth, and looks so like it that there is no sure mark whereby we may distinguish one from the other. It is a damn fool of a world.” What do you think this statement reveals about her worldview? How might this have contributed to her fate?
5. Dmytre, the Ukrainian artist who spent time as a Nazi slave laborer, only to lose his wife and unborn child to a miscarriage, had extremely traumatic experiences that significantly affected his mental health. Yet the hospital offered no therapy to help him examine and heal from these horrific events. Why do you think that that was?
6. Whose life story did you find most personally compelling? What spoke to you about this person’s life?
7. What artifact or artifacts found in an individual’s suitcase did you find most revealing about that person’s past or personality? The most poignant?
8. Can you point to specific passages that struck you personally—as interesting, profound, confusing, incomprehensible, illuminating?
9. Did the book raise unanswered questions for you? If so, what are these?
10. How has this book changed your view of who “mental patients” were in the past? Of people with that label today?
11. What did you learn about the American approach to mental health issues—both past and present—that you did not know previously?
12. This book illustrates how issues surrounding mental health and its treatment affect us all—whether through our family, friends, or community. What lessons should we draw from this book to shape the future of our mental health system? What problems and possible solutions are illuminated by the life stories of the suitcase owners? Who would implement those solutions? How probable is success?

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Coauthor **Darby Penney** (December 10, 1952 – October 11, 2021) was a national leader in the human rights movement for people with psychiatric disabilities.

Coauthor **Peter Stastny** is a psychiatrist and documentary filmmaker who has advocated for radical changes in the mental health system and worked on several transformative demonstration projects in New York and around the world. He has collaborated with Darby Penney and other experts-by-experience on spreading self-help and empowerment programs, spearheaded the employment of ex-patients in alternative services, and is a founder of the International Network for Alternatives and Recovery (INTAR). Peter was on the faculty of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Columbia University and continues to teach and work in New York City.

Photographer **Lisa Rinzler** is a prize-winning cinematographer of films such as *Menace II Society*, *Pollack*, and *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan*. Her photographs illustrate the book alongside reproductions of excerpted medical records and images found among the suitcase contents.

## GO BEHIND THE SCENES

*The Lives They Left Behind* gave rise to a successful campaign to commemorate patients who had been buried in unmarked graves on the grounds of the Willard State Psychiatric Hospital. Find a multimedia presentation about this campaign and the lives it has touched in the *New York Times*.

Discover more about the book at [www.blpress.org](http://www.blpress.org).