

The Lives They Lived 2018

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Walter Mischel: A psychologist of great discipline who sometimes couldn't wait before grabbing that second marshmallow.

Picture a boy, 8 years old, assisting his parents in a strange and somber task. In their gracious home in Vienna, they are throwing family documents into the fireplace, trying to erase their Jewish identities in the flames. Hitler's troops have just rolled through their streets to cheering crowds. Now the boy, about to throw another document into the fire, stops: This one has a gold seal and a photo affixed. The man in the photo, he learns when he shows it to his parents, is his maternal grandfather, who once lived in the United States. The document is a revelation, proof that he had become an American citizen before returning to Vienna, and it will be their salvation.

A flash of gold, a moment's hesitation. A psychologist might analyze the story through the prisms associated with what researchers call positive life outcomes. The boy was intelligent. The boy's family was well off at that point. What about the boy's character? Was he distractible, his urgent task so easily interrupted by a shiny bit of foil? Or was it the opposite — was he a child who, even in a moment of panic, could pause, wait, show self-restraint?