Bringing the Past into the Present: Family Narratives of Holocaust, Exile, and Diaspora

Lessons about Humanity and Survival from My Mother and from the Holocaust

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Abstract
This essay centers on a story from the Holocaust, situated in the context of history, identity, and political economy, a story with lessons that have continued relevance for our understanding of violence, suffering, survival, and their aftermath. My mother was an aspiring physician in pre-war Poland, whose career was cut short when she was arrested by the Gestapo in 1944. As a Polish Catholic caught in the Holocaust, her story raises issues concerning the blurred boundaries of concepts such as survivor and collective memory, and provides the opportunity to apply “the focusing power of the Holocaust,” by underscoring the key, pervasive role that forces such as dehumanization continue to play in the production and reproduction of violence, be it physical, political, symbolic, or structural. [Holocaust, Ravensbrück, Poland, dehumanization, violence, survivor, autoethnography]
The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.

— Muriel Rukeyser

This essay is about a story from the time of the Holocaust, how it came to be told, and some of the lessons that it offers for our understanding of violence, suffering, and survival—lessons from the past that may be relevant to our present. It is also a personal story that has challenged me as daughter and as anthropologist. Over the last few years I have been talking to my mother about her ordeals as prisoner 32220, 32049, and 64973, numbers she was given at three different Nazi concentration camps over a fifteen month period, from 1944 to 1945. From the outset, there has been an interplay of roles. As the daughter documents this family narrative, the anthropologist is contextualizing the story, embedding it in broader history and political economy; what emerges is an “ethnography of rediscovery”—of my mother’s story, of my own history, and of history writ-large.

My mother was born on October 1, 1910, in the Polish industrial city of Łódź, christened Jadwiga Helena Lenartowicz, although family and friends have always called her Jadzia. The Catholic church in which she was baptized would serve, three decades later, as a Nazi warehouse where down and feathers confiscated from deported Jews were sorted and shipped out to Germany, while a connected parish building would be the headquarters of the Kriminalpolizei, who patrolled and terrorized the residents of the Łódź ghetto. Her baptism in this church marks a prophetic beginning for my mother, whose own life would be enmeshed in and shaped by the forces of World War II and the Holocaust.

This project crosscuts several established genres within anthropology, including life history and autoethnography, each with its own (though interrelated) methods, ethical dilemmas, and epistemological issues. I will touch on a few points of particular relevance for what I am calling intimate ethnography (Waterston and Rylko-Bauer n.d.), where the personal and the emotional suffuse the work at all levels; these include having an intimate as key informant, the collaborative effort of reconstituting memory, and issues relating to the creation of life history. My aim in this essay, however, is to go beyond the personal and emotional, by linking individual suffering and displacement to larger social and structural forces, that form “the social machinery of oppression” (Farmer 2004:307). These are forces that continue to shape our world today, forces that both produce and reproduce violence, including structural violence that results from ethnic and religious hatred, racism, and basic inequalities.
In describing her experiences from World War II, my mother often recalls how, seemingly by chance, a person or a bureaucratic decision made the difference between bad and good outcomes. These “survival stories” form one of the framing structures of her narrative, and she usually concludes the recounting by commenting: “jakaś ręka nad Radmą czuwała (some force must have been watching over me).” In this essay, I examine forces other than providence that were also in play, and in the process situate her experience in relation to that of others in the Holocaust and to history. My mother’s reconstituted history—a Polish Catholic caught up in the Holocaust—provides an entrée into issues surrounding survival and identity, as well as the experience of violence, including dehumanization, and its aftermath.

Reconstituting History

From Reluctant Witness to Key Informant

I grew up knowing that my parents had mutually agreed to regard the past as “a closed book” (to use my mother’s term)—something they would not revisit; and that their life in the United States was the beginning of a “new book.” Even so, there was never a blanket silence over the past, it was always present in the background. My parents did not regard the past nostalgically, as some of their friends were wont to do about the “good life” in prewar Poland. Their determined orientation towards the future was a means for coping with past losses, while adapting to the great challenges of a strange culture and a new country.

And so, my mother was initially a reluctant participant in this project of reconstituting her past. She was not convinced that her story was special: “I don’t think that my life was that interesting—maybe interesting to you, but for me it was very unpleasant.” Nor was she sure how it should be documented; “so much has been written already,” she would say.

When my mother finally agreed to start talking systematically about her past, the process of remembering was at times quite distressing. “Let’s not talk anymore,” she said at one point, “because then I don’t sleep nights, thinking of all this.” I would often worry about my obligations, both as daughter and as anthropologist—was it worth causing my mother anguish, dredging up painful memories, reopening old wounds? And what were my responsibilities to her as my informant?

In the midst of this process, we took a trip to Poland together in 2001. My mother had visited family there many times (the first trip was in 1967), but it had
been 15 years since I had accompanied her. For the first time, she showed an interest in visiting sites from her past. We found the house that served as both her father’s medical office and the family’s home on Zawiszy Street, until the family had to move when that area was incorporated into the Łódź Ghetto. We visited the hospital where she had worked until she was dismissed by the Nazis.6

My mother has now come full circle, seeing this project as a validation of her history and acknowledging: “I suppose I did have a rich and full life, after all.” The importance, for her, of telling a life story is “so that History does not keep repeating itself, to ludobójstwo, this mass killing of people.” My challenge, as chronicler, is how to harness the power of such a story.

Having one’s parent as a “key informant” may be a bit unusual, but writing about one’s parent from an anthropological perspective is not unprecedented. Ben Orlove (1995) wrote about his family’s life using materials discovered when sorting out his father’s extensive personal papers after his death. In the process, he created a rich mix of biography, autobiography, and social history of the Jewish immigrant experience. While the role of ethnographer always demands that one get close to others, especially key informants, this is usually a gradual, evolving process. In my case, the relationship between ethnographer and informant was characterized by intimacy from the outset, with pre-existing reciprocal obligations and expectations. Herein lies another challenge, for there are benefits as well as drawbacks to such a close relationship.

Such intimacy does not guarantee insight, for it may act as a filter—what is familiar can be difficult to see in new ways. At times it has acted as a wall, causing me to skirt issues that were painful (e.g., the burdened history of Polish-Jewish relations) or events that were distressing (stories that break a daughter’s heart). And, as Waterston points out in her essay in this collection, such a project stretches boundaries and can be much more emotionally exhausting, than might be the case with traditional, more distanced ethnographic relationships. At the same time, the shared experiences and understandings—from the very personal to the broadly cultural—that exist between daughter/anthropologist and mother/key informant, can reveal complexities that otherwise might be missed. Self-awareness is critical to this endeavor, as is listening to the life story with an ethnographic ear and viewing the contextualizing history through an ethnographic lens.

From Memory to Narrative

“Given the distortions of memory and the mediation of language, narrative is always a story about the past and not the past itself” (Ellis and Bochner
This statement highlights some of the dilemmas that I have faced in this project. While my mother has an amazing facility for remembering details from the past, she also focuses on the same anecdotes, and when pressed to reflect or elaborate, often responds impatiently, “it’s been over 60 years, how can you expect me to remember everything!” Remembering is a complex process. Past events get interpreted and reinterpreted over time, and with each repeated telling, a certain version (not necessarily any more or less “true” than other versions) seems to get engraved in memory and becomes the reality that is shared with others.

Anthropologists and others have argued that individual memories are not so much about veracity and historical facts, as they are about meanings (Climo and Cattell 2002:16-17). Langer makes a similar point concerning Holocaust testimonies, in answering the query, “how credible can a reawakened memory be that tries to revive events so many decades after they occurred?”

I think the terminology itself is at fault here. There is no need to revive what has never died....since testimonies are human documents rather than merely historical ones, the troubled interaction between past and present achieves a gravity that surpasses the concern with accuracy. Factual errors do occur from time to time, as do simple lapses; but they seem trivial in comparison to the complex layers of memory that give birth to the [various] versions of the self (1991:xv).

Transforming memories into narrative is a complex process. In thinking about “truth” and its representation, I am reminded of Crapanzano’s distinction (1980:5) between the reality of personal history (which assumes that there is a correspondence between a text and a set of human actions) and the truth of autobiography: “the latter resides within the text itself without regard to any external criteria save, perhaps, the I of the narrator.” In the final analysis, I view my mother’s reconstruction of her history as “true” in the sense of story. Even as I search for historical corroboration to help resocialize her story, I am less concerned with whether her recounting is “an accurate enactment, reconstruction, or representation of what actually occurred,” for as LaCapra (2001:88, 89) notes, testimonies are not just a recounting, they can also be an “acting out, working over, and working through” of that remembered past.

My mother aptly points out, that “unless you go through this yourself, you can listen, someone can tell you all about it, but you have no idea what it is like, you can’t even imagine.” She also acknowledges that the past traumas of
her life still haunt her from time to time, when she says, “to piętno dalej nad-
demną siedzi,” (this has branded me to this day).” Perhaps as important as the
issue of veracity, is the challenge of capturing the emotional and cognitive
contexts of such a story—“how to represent and, more generally, come to
terms with affect in those who have been victimized and traumatized by their
experiences” (LaCapra 2001:87).

In reconstructing my mother’s history, a “third voice” emerges, “which is
neither the voice of the informant nor the voice of the interviewer, but the
voice of their collaboration” (Kaminsky 1992:7, quoting Barbara Myerhoff). What
follows are the recollections of an elderly woman, initially told in Polish,
then reshaped (through translation) and resocialized (through historical con-
textualization) by the anthropologist—together creating a new “voice.”

Jadzia’s Story

The Early Years

Jadzia was only 3 years old when World War I began; her early childhood is
remembered as a time of hardship. Her father was gone, conscripted into the
Russian army and then imprisoned in Siberia, only managing to escape after
the war. Her mother was left with four daughters (5 years old and younger) to
feed and care for. Things improved markedly after the war. Because of my
grandfather’s thriving medical practice, Jadzia and her four sisters were fortu-
nate enough to attend private schools and the family lived in relative middle-
class comfort.

In 1930, she left to attend the Medical College at the University of Poznań,
as one of 25 women in a class of 150. Upon finishing the six-year program,
she moved back to Łódź and began her postgraduate medical training. At the
outbreak of World War II, Jadzia was in the midst of completing her residen-
cy in pediatrics.

One of the early actions taken by the Nazis was a campaign to suppress the
Polish elite, with the result that thousands of teachers, landowners, priests,
and professors were rounded up, removed from their jobs, and in many cases,
murdered (Steinlauf 1997). And so, once the Nazis settled into their occupa-
tion of Łódź, Jadzia was dismissed from the children’s hospital and assigned
to a neighborhood clinic. She had gone from a relatively privileged position
within the medical structure to a low paying post working in general practice,
despite having little experience in dealing with adult medical problems.
Life for Poles in general, under Nazi rule, was perilous and highly restricted. As Steinlauf (1997:23) notes, “the German occupation of Poland was the cornerstone of Nazi plans for a Eurasian empire stratified by race, in which German masters would rule over ‘racially inferior,’ primarily Slavic, peoples.” Random violence, street round-ups, and rule by terror became the norm. All Poles fourteen years and older were required to work, secondary schools and universities were closed, cultural activities were banned, and the Polish language was suppressed. Łódź, in particular, was subjected to intense Germanization, its name changed to Litzmannstadt, and all streets and squares given German names (Dobroszycki 1984).

Life for the city’s large Jewish community (about 35 percent of the total population during the 1930s) was immeasurably worse than for the general Polish population from the very start of the Nazi occupation. By early 1940, all of the remaining Jews were forced into the newly-created Łódź ghetto, which was then sealed off from the rest of the city. Living conditions were
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extremely poor, due in part to overcrowding and minimal sanitary facilities; 164,000 people were packed into an area of 1.54 square miles. Infectious diseases, such as typhus fever and tuberculosis, rapidly emerged and along with shortages of fuel and inadequate food supply, led to high mortality rates; 43,500 people died in the ghetto itself from these causes (Krakowski 1990). The ghetto also served as both a point of destination for Jews transported from Western Europe, and a point of deportation to the death camps (Dobroszycki 1984).

Several of the physicians on staff at the Anny Marii hospital where Jadzia was doing her residency training were Jewish and she still remembers a tragic story concerning one of them.

There was Dr. Henryka Frenkel. She was excellent, with an international reputation as a newborn specialist. Her husband and son fled to England, while it was still possible. The plan was for her and their teenaged daughter to later join them. But this didn’t happen, she wanted to stay at the hospital until the end and then, they couldn’t get out of Poland. Dr. Frenkel and her daughter were to be sent to the Łódź ghetto. Right before they had to go, she committed suicide... they both took poison to avoid going to the ghetto.

One response to the German occupation and oppression in Poland was the formation of “the most effective resistance movement in occupied Europe,” that focused on clandestine educational and cultural activities, a successful underground press, and an extensive campaign of sabotage (Steinlauf 1997:26). Jadzia’s older sister, Marysia, became very active in the Polish resistance. Her code name was “Hurricane” and at times she would recruit a younger sister, Basia, to help in these activities. In May of 1942, both sisters were arrested by the Gestapo. The blond, blue-eyed Basia, slated for deportation to Germany for the Lebensborn (racial breeding) program, was eventually released with my mother’s help. Marysia was sent to Auschwitz.

Enslavement

Nearly two years later, on January 14, 1944, my mother was arrested by the Gestapo, suspected of involvement in the underground movement and listening to clandestine radio (something strictly forbidden to Poles). She spent the next 15 months in various concentration and labor camps. The first of these was Ravensbrück, the large women’s concentration camp located 50
miles north of Berlin, where Jadzia became prisoner number 32220. After a quarantine period lasting perhaps four weeks, she was pulled out of the daily roll call, along with nine other prisoners who happened to be physicians. Each was sent to a different women’s labor camp. “Hipokryzja Niemiecka,” my mother says.

German hypocrisy, wanting to make the camp appear self-sufficient, that it had everything, including a nurse, a doctor. They were afraid that once the war ended they would be held accountable for all of this. So that’s probably why the order came down to get doctors into the camps.

Sometime in May or June, Jadzia found herself in a camp on the outskirts of the town of Neusalz (now called Nowa Sól), located on the banks of the Oder River in what is currently western Poland. She recalls some of the women remarking, “Goja nam przyszli, to może będzie nam lepiej (They’ve sent us a goy, so maybe things are improving!)” This slave labor camp was part of the extensive Gross Rosen concentration camp system, which included an estimated 77 such subcamps. Each major concentration camp had its own bureaucracy, so that transfers from one camp to another entailed new registration and assignment of a new prisoner number. Here Jadzia became prisoner number 32049.

My mother spent about eight months in Neusalz, working as a physician alongside Estera, a Jewish dentist and Hania, a young Jewish woman who had received some rudimentary nursing training from the Nazis. Like the other prisoners of the camp, they all worked without pay, under the watchful eye of the SS (Schutzstaffel, the elite Nazi party police). The three of them shared a small two-room building, the back room serving as sleeping quarters, and the front room for seeing patients. In essence, Jadzia was the slave doctor for slave laborers—1000 Jewish women prisoners forced to work long hours without pay under very difficult conditions, for the German textile firm, Gruschwitz.

All the main concentration camps administered large networks of subcamps. It is estimated that there were 1,634 of these run by the SS, “employing” several million persons in forced labor within the camp system and for German industry (Ferencz 2002:187, 240; Simpson 1995:86-87). This extensive network arose in part because of Germany’s wartime need for labor and production, and it was shaped by Nazi racist ideology. Both the Nazi plan for destroying all the Jews of Europe—the Final Solution, and the broader-based policy of “extermination through work” (Vernichtung durch Arbeit) intersected
with the stated goal of eliminating “undesirable” populations from greater Germany. This latter policy targeted, first and foremost, all Jews but it also included Gypsies, prostitutes, homosexuals, as well as Poles, Czechs and other “Slavs” (Wolf 1999).

These policies were at least tolerated, if not facilitated by most of German industry and by other corporate and political entities that had stakes in the German financial and industrial complex (Allen 2002, Simpson 1995). “Requests for workers came from thousands of private German firms engaged in war production that needed help to meet their own work schedules. The demand exceeded the supply, and those companies with the highest priority or the best connections were given preference” (Ferencz 2002:187). The Jewish women who labored for Gruschwitz Textilwerke AG in Neusalz were like the countless other slave laborers throughout the Nazi empire, who worked as “less than slaves” (to use Ferencz’s term) for the German war industry and for many of Germany’s corporations, some of which are still in business today.8

**The Death March**

In the first few weeks of 1945, Soviet forces began a major offensive into central Poland. By late January, as they were approaching the Oder River, SS authorities began evacuating Gross Rosen subcamps, including the one at Neusalz.

They evacuated us, the entire labor camp. We could hear shots, sounds of fighting on the other side of the river, and we knew that the Russians were coming closer. We were given bread, marmalade, a blanket, and a backpack in which to carry these. The entire camp was divided into three groups and then the wandering started. They would march us, five abreast, on roads along the outskirts of towns and villages, so the residents wouldn’t see us, and we would stop for the night in abandoned stables and barns.

Historian Martin Gilbert (1993:218) has mapped this 42-day death march through southeastern Germany and the western Sudetenland, an estimated 280 miles long. On the basis of survivor testimony, Gilbert suggests that only about 200 women managed to reach their final destination—the Flossenburg concentration camp—by mid March. Try as she may, Jadzia cannot remember the final trek to Flossenburg and she has only vague recollections of women lying along the road, having fainted or fallen from exhaustion. She knows that others died, but cannot recall many details about that aspect of the march.
My mind was focused on living and on walking, walking, walking. I have no idea how we survived. When you're marching from morning 'til night, then get just a bit to eat and not that nutritious, and then lay yourself down in litter somewhere, to try and sleep...your brain stops working. After a while, you are like an automaton, placing one foot in front of the other, not at all aware of what is going on around you. You did everything to not fall down, because if you fell, that would be the end, there you would remain.

The women stayed in Flossenburg for only about a week and then were sent on another journey, this time in crammed cattle cars to the concentration camp, Bergen-Belsen, where typhus raged.

My mother was spared this horrific ordeal. Instead, she was placed into a cell, in solitary confinement, and fed regularly to regain her strength. As it turned out, the Nazis needed a female doctor for another slave labor camp associated with Flossenburg. In late March, Jadzia was sent to Mehltheuer, where she again served as physician to the Jewish women imprisoned there, becoming prisoner number 64973. The camp was liberated by U.S. forces on April 15, 1945.

From Refugee to Immigrant
Like so many survivors of World War II, Jadzia ended up as a refugee in Germany, where she worked as a physician in several Polish displaced person camps. During this time she met and married my father, Wladyslaw Rytko, a colonel in the Polish army who had spent over five years as a German prisoner of war. In November 1950, my parents immigrated to the United States, sailing out from the port of Bremerhaven, Germany. As my mother recalls,

This was an old retired navy war ship, named 'General McLaughlin,' and it shook and creaked so much, that we all thought it would fall apart at any moment! Since I had a child, I was given a small cabin that I shared with a Ukrainian woman who also had a baby. Your father slept with the other men in a large hall.

Upon arriving in New York City, my parents boarded a train for Detroit. They arrived at their final destination with $700 in their pockets and me, their 10 month old infant.

The struggles that characterized the postwar immigrant experience in the United States and elsewhere have often been glossed over in the understand-
Dr. Jadwiga Rytko working in the dispensary, Polish displaced persons camp, Hoechst, Germany, 1949.

able effort of documenting what occurred during the war, and this is even so for biographies written by survivors and their children, as Eva Hoffman (2004) notes. And yet, emigration involved major adjustments including, for many, the loss of their former means of livelihood. My father had been a career army officer in Poland; in Detroit, he was a sporadically employed draftsman in the automotive industry. My mother had planned on earning a living as a physician, but was unable to meet the financial and bureaucratic requirements that would have allowed her to practice medicine in the U.S. With a husband in poor health and struggling to find work, a young child, and bills mounting, Jadzia became a nurse’s assistant, working for 20 years on the pediatric ward of a local hospital. She once told me: “What you did in the past, your qualifications, really didn’t matter here...you were an immigrant and you didn’t fit, and so you took what you could, because you had to survive.” This loss of her
profession, my mother says, has actually been harder for her to bear than the incarceration she endured during the war.

Resocializing Narrative

Jadzia’s story has commonalties with other accounts from World War II and the Holocaust, but given that she is not Jewish, it also raises issues relating to identity and survival. Her account—and by this I mean, the way in which she tells it and what she views as significant—also points to larger processes in the experience of violence and its aftermath that have relevance beyond this story and this time in history.

A Polish Catholic as Holocaust Survivor?

Psychologist Henry Greenspan, who spent over twenty years listening to Holocaust survivors, writes that “a story from lived experience marks the boundaries of a journey,” and thus, “every story—just by virtue of being a story—is implicitly a narrative of survival. Whatever was experienced can now be told with coherence and perspective. Whatever transpired, it was somehow gotten through” (1998:145-6). And so Jadzia, in this very basic sense, is a survivor of what transpired during the Holocaust, she is a part of that event in history.

The Holocaust is generally associated with the planned extermination of all the Jews of Europe. However, some scholars have argued for a more inclusive notion that includes the systematic killing of the Roma (Gypsies) and of the disabled (Friedlander 1995).10 The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in fact, characterizes the Holocaust as “the systematic, state-sponsored murder of six million Jews and millions of non-Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators during World War II” (1996:9); its definition of survivor is equally inclusive. Cole (1999:5) notes that “the myth of the ‘Holocaust’ [as representation of the historical event] has emerged within an international context…embraced by Jew and non-Jew alike,” and suggests that it “cannot be restricted to a purely Jewish ethnic marker.” But other scholars continue to situate it squarely as the touchstone of modern Jewish identity (Hoffman 2004, Steiner 1988) or argue for a narrower definition, as a very special case of genocide, since its aim was the total destruction of all Jews. “Holocaust can be used in two ways: to describe what happened to the Jews at Nazi hands and to describe what might happen to others if the Holocaust of the Jewish people becomes a precedent for similar actions” (Bauer 2001:10). The reasons for such variations and the debates that
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accompany them are, of course, historical, religious, intellectual, political, as well as emotional (Berenbaum 1990).

How does Jadzia see herself? In recounting her concentration camp experiences, my mother never identifies herself as a “Holocaust survivor.” This is different from “survival,” which is a frequent theme in her accounts. In describing situations where someone else’s action improved her lot or maybe even saved her life, she will often conclude: “when I look back in time, I wonder how was I able to do all this, to endure all this, and to survive?”

For example, while in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, Jadzia was selected for transport to Oranienburg, a subcamp located about 30 miles south. Prior to leaving, the women had to undergo a physical exam.

This was a labor camp where they manufactured products for the army, using lead. It was rumored that most women managed to survive for only about three months because of lead poisoning. Well, in the infirmary, under the supervision of the German doctor, there worked a classmate of mine, Adamska, who had studied with me in Poznań. She came to Ravensbrück early on, she had been there since 1941. When she saw me in this group, she immediately went to the German doctor and managed to convince him that since I was a fellow physician, he should pull me out by declaring me too sick to be sent to work in that factory. And so, thanks to her I was not sent off to Oranienburg.

Hoffman notes that “survivors of the Holocaust rarely thought of themselves as ‘survivors’ until the term became routine, and an honorific” (2004:172). Within the context of the Holocaust, “survivor” has taken on specific meanings concerning shared memory, identity, and legacy. As Steiner notes, “the uniqueness of the Shoah,” is linked directly to this collective traumatic memory and is situated in the deep recesses of Jewish identity: “The Shoah, the remembrance of Auschwitz, the haunting apprehension that, somewhere, somehow, the massacres could begin anew, is today the cement of Jewish identity...Above all else, to be a Jew in the second half of this century is to be a survivor, and one who knows that his survival can again be put in question” (1988:159-60).

My mother’s story underscores the blurred boundaries of such labeled events and experiences, as the Holocaust, survivor, and suffering. Here we have a Polish Catholic swept into the Holocaust, working as the prisoner-doctor for, and alongside, Jewish slave laborers. She was the only non-Jew in that
camp, with the exception of the German *Lagerführerin*, the female camp commander and the SS women who assisted her. Along with the rest of the prisoners, she was sent on the death march, where many perished along the way. She and a number of other women did survive, but barely. As a Jewish colleague of mine once said, "on that death march, only God knew who was Jew and who was not." One starving, dirty, lice-ridden, bedraggled woman looked like any other to the German *Bauern*, in whose barns and stables these women spent the night, or to the bystanders who saw the women as they marched by, or to the *Hitlerjugend*, who mocked them and beat their legs with riding whips. It is precisely at such points of blurring that we have a chance to expand our understandings of social phenomena.

Jadzia makes no claims to being a “Holocaust survivor.” It’s not that she rejects this label from some moral or political stance; the issue simply never comes up. When I try to probe, she interprets the question as one of difference and reiterates that she did not feel any different from the Jewish women who were in Neusalz. “Many of them were from Poland, they spoke my language, and they were friendly with me. Remember when some of the Jewish women gave me a surprise, made me a *Wigilia* (Christmas Eve)?” She then relates, yet again, how some of the Jewish women knitted her a lovely wool sweater for Christmas, from dark beet-red yarn somehow pilfered from the factory where they worked. This discussion about not feeling “any different” glosses over the complexities of Jadzia’s position and status as physician vis-à-vis the young women who lived in the labor camp and worked as slaves for *Gurschwitz*. At the same time, it also underscores the fact that she was different—a Christian, not a Jew. And yet from Jadzia’s perspective, the differences were less important than the overarching point of convergence...she was a fellow prisoner.

Jadzia sees herself as a survivor not of the Holocaust, per se, but rather of World War II, of Nazi brutality, of Hitler’s madness. She is a Catholic Pole, caught up in the events and aftermath of World War II, of which the persecution of the Jews was a critical part. It is I, the anthropologist, who dares to cross these blurred boundaries and situate my mother within the Holocaust...as part of that event in history, but also as apart from its deep and complex meanings. In examining the label, “survivor,” I see both points of sameness and points of difference between my mother’s story and that of other Holocaust survivors.

The points of sameness are evident in the factors that shaped the trajectories of people’s lives in the camps. Ruth Linden (1993:95) notes that many
Holocaust survivors attribute their survival largely to luck, and yet she finds within their testimonies evidence for the fact that “luck alone was an insufficient condition for surviving.” Factors such as knowledge of dangers and risks, practical skills, relationships and networks, as well as determination also played a role, as they did in Jadzia’s journey through the camps. In her narrative, however, she focuses her attention on the numerous chance occurrences that either improved her lot or literally saved her life—something she characterizes as “szczęście w nieszczęściu,” or fortune within misfortune.

At the same time, Jadzia recognizes that her skills as a physician also played an important role, and she often remarks, “I was saved by my profession, time and time again.” In two separate instances, the SS needed a prisoner-doctor and she was picked. At other times, former patients or physician colleagues, who were also caught in the web of Nazi rule and oppression, but were in positions of relative power, chose to come to her aid (as when she was pulled out of the transport to Oranienburg). Agency on my mother’s part played no role here. It was serendipity and the intervention of others, perhaps triggered by some sense of reciprocity or loyalty arising from past relationships, or perhaps even seen by them as a small act of resistance. Knowing that medicine saved her life made the subsequent loss of her profession, once my mother immigrated to the United States, doubly painful.

My mother overlooks one other factor, but it is one that I recognize as playing perhaps the most significant role in her survival: she was not a Jew, nor a Roma, nor disabled.

The points of departure in my mother’s story, compared to that of other Holocaust survivors, are situated in the aftermath of this violence. Hoffman notes that traumatic memories of suffering experienced by Holocaust survivors can express themselves in personality and behavior. Survivors, not surprisingly, “are often difficult people, and are found to be so by others (2004:54).” Many, but not all, continued to live with a sense of shame, stigma or guilt, which not infrequently got passed on to the next generation. “Over and over, the children speak of being permeated by sensations of panic and deadliness, of shame and guilt” (2004:63).

My parents did not dwell upon their wartime experiences, although the past was always there, in the background, and there was no shame or stigma attached to having been a prisoner-of-war or a political prisoner in the concentration camps. Jadzia does not present herself as “victim,” although she will at times acknowledge, “I endured a lot, I suffered quite a bit in my life.” Nor does she seem to harbor deep bitterness, anger or hatred toward her persecutors.
Most importantly, throughout Jadzia’s narrative, there is no evident sense of “survivor guilt.” There are several reasons for this. Jadzia lost friends and colleagues, and her family suffered during the war, but everyone in the immediate family did survive. Would her reaction be different if Jadzia’s sisters had not survived? What if blond and blue-eyed Basia had been transported to Germany? What if the other sister, Marysia, had perished in either of the two concentration camps where she spent three years of the war, in Auschwitz or in Bergen-Belsen?

Historians note that Poles undoubtedly suffered greatly during the war, in lives lost and in the extensive damage that the Nazis wrought with special fury upon the Polish landscape (Davies 2004, Rossino 2003, Steinlauf 1997). What remained from the rubble of war for the Polish population (those who had stayed and those who returned) was a nation and a culture—albeit deeply wounded, but still intact, waiting to be rebuilt. As the Polish poet Szymborska writes, “After every war/someone has to tidy up.”

But for many of the Jews of Poland and throughout Europe, there was not much left to tidy up. Entire families, shtetls, communities were massacred. What remains today from that past, are histories of a former way of life or poignant photo essays such as Vishniac’s (1983) A Vanished World. This is part of the legacy of the Holocaust for Jews—a world, a culture, a people, almost wiped out by design. As Steiner (1988) notes, this collective traumatic memory is shared by Jews throughout the world. Eva Hoffman, a daughter of Holocaust survivors, writes,

> I think—feel—how much my own life has been shadowed by this past, despite all my attempts to escape it. And how long it has taken me to unravel and then braid together its raveled, knotted, cut, and fragmented threads until I could distinguish shadows from realities and fable from history (2004:233).

For Jadzia—and for me—there is no comparable collective memory embedded in the Holocaust.

There is, however, at least a subliminal yearning for some sort of connection. I became aware of this when my mother showed interest in an unpublished memoir I had acquired, handwritten in Polish by a young Jewish woman who was in the same slave labor camp, Neusalz. At one point, my mother began to read large segments aloud (tape recorded by me), verbally annotating the text as she went along. From her comments and reactions, it
was evident that she was eager to see what others recalled from this shared experience; she sought reassurance that her personal memory was also part of the social memory of those times.12

In the Polish collective conscience, there is a cult of memory surrounding the war itself, symbolized by iconic events, such as the heroic but disastrous Warsaw uprising of August, 1944 (Davies 2004). The Holocaust, on the other hand, occupies a liminal space within that Polish memory (Hoffman 2004:31). The Holocaust, for Jews, has multiple, complex, deep and dark meanings that for someone like myself and for my mother, can never be internalized. In this sense, then, Jadzia is a survivor of this time and event in history, but she is apart from the meanings of the Holocaust.

Of course, any complete discussion of the Polish experience of World War II must be situated within the broader framework of the complex historic relationship of Jews and non-Jews in Poland. “The Jewish connection to Poland is as old as Polish history,” with the earliest Jewish settlements dating back to the late 12th century—a complex history, marked by co-existence and co-shaping of Polish culture, as well as marred all too often by endemic anti-Semitism and flare-ups of ethnic conflict (Steinlauf 1997:1). This complexity continued into modern times. Eva Hoffman (2004:16-17) notes that Poland was “the site of two catastrophes,”

...the Nazi war of conquest against the Polish nation and...the campaign of extermination directed against all Jews of Europe, but executed mostly on Polish territory. Most of the concentration camps were situated on Polish soil, and it has often been assumed that the Germans had placed them there because they counted on the collusion of the Poles...This has been repeatedly shown to be untrue...

Instead, the actual history of World War II is characterized both by extremes of heroism and of betrayal, as well as degrees of concern or indifference on the part of many, to the tragic Jewish situation.13

One of the lessons of Jadzia’s story is a reminder that history and the events it depicts are much more complex than we realize. This nuanced construction of “survivor” is not about who suffered more or who suffered less; such debates on the relativity of suffering (often colored by the politics of identity) are more likely to serve the clouding or even erasure, rather than clarification, of history. Nor is it about the question of who is represented by the collective term of “Holocaust.” As Berenbaum notes, “comparisons do not
innately obscure the uniqueness of the Holocaust; they clarify it” (1990:34). This analysis acknowledges the critical and fundamental differences between the experience of Jew and non-Jew, without erasing the reality of what Jadzia and others went through, who were thrust into the center of the maelstrom. To do otherwise, would contribute to keeping this part of the Holocaust’s history in the shadows. Recognizing both the uniqueness and the complexity of what happened during the Holocaust expands its relevance and affords the possibility of reaching across differences, rather than reifying them. This may well be the most important lesson about humanity that can be learned from Jadzia’s survival of the Holocaust.

“To be Treated Not as the Human I Am”

Dehumanization is a recurring theme in writings about the Holocaust, as well as in other documented instances of mass terror and violence, war, genocide, slavery and oppression (Chalk and Jonassohn 1990, Hinton 2002). And it also appears in Jadzia’s story.

When we arrived [in Ravensbrück] they took the whole group of us to a large washroom and we slept on the linoleum floor. In the morning, we had to strip off all our clothes, leave everything, and take a shower. Then you walked to another room, where they were doing examinations. You were examined everywhere, to make sure you weren’t hiding gold anyplace on your body...Each of us had to go naked, one by one. The exam was done by other female prisoners, German women, who had to work under SS supervision. They checked us out, and when ordered to, would cut off all our hair with clippers. Not everyone got her hair cut off. She clipped my entire head, to the scalp—this was the worst part for me, losing my hair. I thought I would simply go crazy. This was so degrading—I felt like I could just strike out, just kick someone—but of course, I didn’t.14

Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004:1) note that violence cannot be understood simply in terms of physical action, it “also includes assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim. The social and cultural dimensions of violence are what gives violence its power and meaning.” This is precisely why the act of cutting—or rather chopping and brusquely shaving—the hair of female prisoners was so traumatic. It was physical violence in a context of terror and uncertainty, but with profound symbolic and
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social meaning, underscoring the message: you are powerless, sexless, nameless, not a person, less than human.

From the beginning, camp officials worked on stripping newcomers of their identity. Jadzia recalls the SS-woman in charge telling them, “You have no family. There is no family, it’s just you, ...and you are nothing, just a number.” This message was reinforced in the daily ritual of the roll call, when each woman’s number would be called out.

We all lined up in groups of five, straight, at attention. There were thousands of women standing out there during the Appel. Sometimes it would last for several hours. Rain would fall and you would get wet, your shoes, your dress. You were not allowed to step out of line.

Selections to assess who was able to work, and who was not, occurred in an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, and were particularly degrading. Jadzia recalls how one morning, an SS officer appeared during the roll call and began to look the women over, as they stood in line.

This fat German officer arrived to pick out women for work in a factory [in Oranienburg] that made military equipment. He looked into your mouth to see what your teeth and gums looked like—I had all my teeth, healthy with only one gold crown. And he looked at your hands, to see if they were work-worn, which meant that you were used to physical labor... My hands were soft and smooth. And then he made a mark on your forehead, like a “1” with some sort of crayon, meaning that you were selected for the transport. Even though I was so thin, they still wanted to send me off to work. When I look back on this, it’s as if we were set out for sale.

Jadzia’s vignettes echo the many other accounts that document such insidious and constant dehumanization that was the hallmark of Nazi rule and of life in the camps. One might even say that her depictions sound relatively “mild,” compared to the graphic and the grotesque that Primo Levi (1996), Tadeusz Borowski (1976), and Charlotte Delbo (1995) among others, have so eloquently described. In discussing the extreme ‘gratuitous violence’ that characterizes genocide in general, and the Holocaust in particular, Eva Hoffman (2004:43) notes that “among the most painful elements poured so venomously into the victim’s soul is precisely the sense of humiliation—not for having done anything but for having submitted to degrading treatment.”
My mother echoes this sentiment when she makes the following remark: “you know, hunger didn’t really bother me, I can tolerate hunger. But to be treated like an animal or worse, and not as the human I am, this I couldn’t bear.”

Jadzia was at Ravensbrück for six weeks, maybe less. But her encounter with what she refers to as “poniżenie człowieczeństwa (the degradation of humanity)”—meaning not just what she experienced personally, but also what she saw all around her—became the standard by which my mother judged the rest of her concentration camp experiences.

While in transit from Ravensbruck to the Neusalz slave labor camp, Jadzia spent about a month in another labor camp, located near the Czech town of Trutenau. When I asked her what it was like, I recall being stunned by her response: “It really was very pleasant there.”

There was a small barrack, but with separate beds. I could take a walk around this recreation area, from time to time. There was a Jewish dentist who had her office in a very small barrack. And I and another doctor had a place set aside there to see patients together, for minor things, just exams, things like headaches, other aches.

Here was a lesson in the relativity of suffering. In Trutenau, Jadzia was still a prisoner: “Of course, SS women guarded and watched us. When we slept, they would make checks during the night, so you couldn’t close the doors.” But in Trutenau, Jadzia had her own bed (not crammed bunks stacked three levels high), decent clothes (a clean two-piece suit, even if it was still prison garb), new socks and wooden shoes that fit. “Ja nie czułam się że jestem niczym (I no longer felt like I was nothing)” Jadzia went from being just another Polish prisoner—shaven, given a number, clothed in a thin, coarse prison dress and socks with holes on the heels, treated as less-than-human—to at least a valued commodity, a prisoner-doctor.

During the death march, Jadzia was confronted with a different facet of dehumanization, that forced her, as a doctor, into an ethically unacceptable situation. Even after all these years, my mother still feels a sense of outrage, when she recounts this incident.

We had stopped at a stable for the night, when two German guards came and asked me to follow them, warning me to not talk, just look. In a room of the nearby empty farmhouse, there were two young
women lying in the straw. I didn’t recognize them. They were probably out looking for some food, hungry, and a guard thought they were trying to escape. One of them lay bleeding badly, she had been shot in the neck, and the guard let me check her pulse but would not allow me to help her in any way or say anything. The other woman was also shot, but not as seriously. One of the guards then asked, “How long will they live?” This is why they brought me, not to give aid but to confirm how long before they would die! I wanted to say, “it depends on God,” but instead I just said that I couldn’t tell. I don’t know what happened to these two poor women, because on the next day, we had to march on.

Jadzia was essentially coopted into a perversion of medicine and this incident shook her to the core of her identity as a physician. “Długo to nie zapominalam—this memory stayed with me for a long, long time.”

Re-humanization

My mother is almost awed at times by how luck and chance occurrences altered her fate: being transferred out of Ravensbrück at a point in time when conditions there were rapidly deteriorating; being sent to a labor camp where her status as physician certainly enhanced her chances of survival; being pulled out of the group that took the hellish journey to Bergen-Belsen; and of course, surviving the death march.

But Jadzia did not just rely on luck or providence. One survival strategy for victims of oppressive and inhumane situations is to try and re-humanize their daily life, in small and incremental ways. And this is precisely what Jadzia did in Ravensbrück, with her daily washing routine.

The wake-up call came at 4 a.m. Everyone had to get up quickly and wash. What I would do...there were these huge sinks with faucets in the large washroom of our barracks. So large that you could sit in them, that even 5 people could have climbed in. Many women would only wash their face and hands. I would get up earlier, before everyone else, so no one would see me. And I would strip naked and climb into the sink and wash my whole body under the freezing water, using the bit of soap that they gave us. I can’t remember how I dried myself off, but there must have been some sort of towel. I’m convinced that this is why I didn’t get sick while I was there. I did this ażeby być zahartowaną—to get hardened, to toughen up. And then I’d return back to the room to get ready for the Appel.
This daily camp routine clearly took courage, determination, and certainly contributed to her psychological, if not physical survival in Ravensbrück. However, under such conditions of oppression and genocide, this cannot be viewed as a triumph of agency. Jadzia’s daily ritual occurred within a context where there were very few real choices, and where terror, uncertainty, and the potential for death were daily constants. “The degree to which agency is constrained,” Farmer (2004) writes, “correlates inversely, if not always neatly, with the ability to resist marginalization and other forms of oppression.” Or as my mother would say, you had to watch what you did, because any misstep could result in “kóla w głowę (a bullet to the head).”

**Bringing the Past into the Present**

Re-membered lives are moral documents and their function is salvific, inevitably implying, ‘all this has not been for nothing.’

— Barbara Myerhoff, *Remembered Lives*

Following Myerhoff, I view this narrative that I am writing—my mother’s story—as a moral document with a place in history. This, in turn, implies a series of obligations, the first of which is to reconstitute the story in such a way that it remains true to its essence.

The themes that emerge from Jadzia’s own telling of her story are the common ones of suffering and loss, dehumanization, and ultimately, survival and resilience. Additionally, for my mother, the legacy of the war (and thus, the Holocaust) resides not just in traumatic memories, but also in the aftermath of this violence. Bourguignon (1998:124) notes that for many postwar immigrants, “specialized professional skills and the sense of achievement and identity linked to them lost their value to a significant extent,” leaving them feeling “declassed. Many never recovered their earlier sense of worth.” For Jadzia, medicine was not just a set of skills, a status, or a means to an income and a more comfortable life. Medicine was a vocation, and in those pre-feminist days (the 1930s in Poland), it was surely a special achievement for her to become a doctor. Thus, in her “new life,” each time Jadzia donned the starched pale yellow uniform that marked her as a nurse’s aide in the hospital’s hierarchy of care, she was reminded of what she had lost.

A second obligation is to resocialize the narrative, placing it within broader historical and social context. “Case studies of individuals reveal suffering,
they tell us what happens to one or many people; but to explain suffering, one must embed individual biography in the larger matrix of culture, history, and political economy” (Farmer 2003:41). And so, by contextualizing Jadzia’s story, we take it beyond glimpses of suffering, violence, and displacement. The story becomes a vehicle for examining what it means to be a Polish Catholic survivor of the Holocaust and underscores the role of capital in the Nazi slave labor “industry.”

The characterization of a moral document also suggests a third obligation—to draw lessons from this story that are relevant across time and place. If we truly are serious about edging closer to that salvific goal noted by Myerhoff, then just telling a story, while relevant to the project we call History, is not enough.

If we are content to tell the event without trying to relate it to other events that have occurred in the past or are taking place now, we turn it into a monument. This is better than ignoring it, of course, but that doesn’t mean it’s enough. Our memory of the camps should become an instrument that informs our capacity to analyze the present (Todorov 1996:259).

We need to find ways of bringing the past into the present, to use what Hartman (2002:2) calls “the focusing power of the Holocaust.” And so in conclusion, I would like to take one of the key elements of Jadzia’s story, dehumanization, and place this process in a broader analytic perspective, framed (in Hartman’s words) by “the aftermath of the Holocaust.”

**Dehumanization Writ-large**

Dehumanization depends, in part, on the categorizing and labeling of targeted groups as “other,” legitimized by science, religion, or myth—what Hinton (2002) calls “manufacturing difference.” In Nazi Germany, pseudo-scientific racial typologies were interwoven with a mythic Aryan past and a vision of a master race (Herrenrasse) to support “an evolutionary history of all humankind, in which ‘the fittest’ were destined to conquer and replace the ‘unfit,’ providing the capstone of a seamless rationale for a politics of human inequality” (Wolf 1999:237).

Historian Raul Hillberg (1985, 1989) has detailed how bureaucracy, coupled with the illusion of legality, provided the mechanisms for normalizing both dehumanization and brutality in Nazi policies and practice. As Eric Wolf points out (1999:253-54, citing Kelman 1973), these three factors—the legal
authorization of violence, the creation of bureaucratic structures for routinizing violence, and finally dehumanization of the other—became the “proximate conditions required to remove the customary restraints on open violence against individuals and groups.” In fact, with the Jews, the process of dehumanization was taken to its extreme, for they were labeled not just as subhuman, but as a threat to humanity—as polluters, as a “social virus.”

The role of dehumanization has been documented in many other instances of mass violence and genocide. As Chalk and Jonassohn note, there is “no evidence that a genocide was ever performed on a group of equals. The victims must…clearly [be] defined as something less than fully human” (1990:27-28). And so, in the genocide of the Hereros, “German settlers and officials of South-West Africa thought of the natives as ‘baboons’” (Bridgman and Worley 1997:25). In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge targeted those viewed as elite and as threats to the new order, by applying the socio-political label of “the enemy” (Hinton 1998). And in Rwanda, the Tutsis were viewed as “aliens” within a society whose racial divisions were rooted first in German, and then in Belgian, colonial rule (Mamdani 2001).

Current events—for example, the evolving (right before our eyes) genocide in Darfur, Sudan (Leaning 2004), but also issues such as conditions inside U.S. immigration prisons (Dow 2004) and actions linked to ongoing wars (Hersh 2004)—continue to remind us of the pivotal role of dehumanization in violence and injustice. And evidence repeatedly shows that almost always, individual perpetrators act within a larger socio-political structure that is complicit in, and even promotes, such dehumanization and resulting actions. As Susan Sontag (2004) notes, the simple act of taking photographs of Iraqi prisoners being tortured at Abu Ghraib (which were then voyeuristically viewed by others), was part and parcel of their dehumanization, an act of violence that facilitated further violence.

But what of other events and social processes, characterized by violence that is not only physical or symbolic or political, but also social and structural in nature, and that results in great suffering, injustice, and death? Hartman quotes Terrence des Pres, in stating that the Holocaust has sensitized us, for “after the Holocaust, ‘a new shape of knowledge invades the mind,’ one that opens our eyes—beyond the Holocaust—to the global extent of political misery” (2002:102). And so, we must ask: How is it possible for people to collectively allow others to die on such massive scales—as happens with extreme poverty, starvation, treatable diseases (tuberculosis and AIDS, alone, kill almost 15,000 people daily worldwide), as well as the more obvious cases of
political oppression? Especially in this era of ready global information, communication, and reach? Dehumanization is a critical step—perhaps the linchpin—in all these processes, and goes hand in hand with both individual and collective denial of what is happening around us (Cohen 2001).

Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2002:369) writes of “small wars and invisible genocides” that occur daily against those who are powerless but are seen as a threat to the dominant social and moral order. She situates these along a “genocide continuum” which reflects “our human capacity to reduce others to nonpersons, to monsters, or to things” and thus “gives structure, meaning, and rationale to everyday practices of violence.” The comparative and historically-grounded perspective of anthropology affords us the means to recognize that dehumanization is both a precondition and a part of many sorts of violence, and more significantly, that it is a pervasive force in our modern world. The leap from everyday tolerance of racism, poverty, exclusion, and oppression to more spectacular eruptions of violence is not as great as we would like to think. In fact, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004:12) suggest that “preparation and schooling in ‘how to behave’ during a holocaust or genocide takes place in very normal social contexts and institutions unfolding around us every day.” The acceptance of dehumanization as a “natural” part of the social order and of human history—a normalization of this extreme manifestation of “othering”—is a part of this process.

Jadzia’s story is based on events that happened decades ago, but through retelling, it is brought into the present and takes on new meaning. The lessons it holds about survival and humanity (or dehumanization) have continued relevance for our times. An anthropology of violence, that is grounded in history and that links individual stories of experienced trauma to larger forces of racism, political economy, and social structure, can further our understanding of the social machinery of oppression. But it also requires, as Kleinman (1997:237) notes, “a social theory for framing comparisons of everyday violence in local worlds” and the structures and processes that support it.

The Holocaust can serve as the touchstone of such work, but in ways that avoid the “rampant analogies between the Holocaust and other catastrophes...[that] weaken memory and the truth” (Hartman 2002:10). The challenge is to expand its meanings and its lessons, in Todorov’s words, to let the Holocaust “become an instrument that informs our capacity to analyze the present.” Such an agenda does not diminish the enormity and uniqueness of the Holocaust or other genocides. Instead, it resocializes genocide by paying attention to the sociocultural, psychological, political-economic, and histori-
cal contexts that set the stage for such events to occur. This can lead us toward greater understanding about human capability (at the individual, communal, and state levels) for brutality and inhumanity, for suffering and injustice, or for coexistence, compassion and true humanity, grounded in the totality of human rights.

ENDNOTES

1 I would like to thank Erika Bourguignon, Philippe Bourgois, Ayala Emmett, John van Willigen, and Daniel Bauer for their encouragement and helpful comments on various versions of this essay, which also benefited from the suggestions of anonymous reviewers. Alisse Waterston deserves a special thanks for her valuable input and assistance, and for keeping me on track. Editor Richard Grinker has been very supportive throughout the evolution of this collection of papers, and we appreciate this very much. I am most grateful to Paul Farmer for his steadfast faith, numerous insights, and for challenging me to think beyond the story. My deepest thanks go to my mother, Jadwiga Lenartowicz Rytko, who at the energetic age of 94 remains an inspiration to all who are privileged to know her.

2 My thanks to Paul Farmer for coming up with this characterization of my project.

3 This is documented by Dobroszycki (1984:xxxix) and several photos in this volume on the Łódź Ghetto show the stockpiling of bedding within the church sanctuary (pp. 424 to 425).

4 Anthropology has a long tradition of using life history (and related genres of autobiography, life story, and cultural biography) to further understanding of larger social issues (Langness and Frank 1981). The classic work of Mintz (1974) and Myerhoff (1978) come to mind, as do more recent examples such as Behar’s Translated Woman (1993), and Frank’s Venus on Wheels (2000), to name just a few. There has also been a move toward reflecting on the personal in social research, “writing the self” (Altman 2002), and incorporating personal experiences into ethnographic analysis and writing (e.g., Behar 1996, Climo 1995). Autoethnography, which focuses on the researcher, does this even more purposefully (Ellis and Bochner 2000).

5 A fuller exploration of these issues appears elsewhere (Waterston and Rylko-Bauer nd.).

6 This visit made an impression on both of us. The Anny Marii hospital of her past had been renamed after the war to honor Janusz Korczak, a Jewish physician and educator who lost his life, along with the 200 orphaned children in his charge, in the Nazi death camp, Treblinka. My mother became a celebrity during our brief visit, for it turns out that she was the oldest known living physician associated with the hospital. She was interviewed by hospital administrators and local reporters about what it was like to work there during the 1930s, and then spontaneously, launched into a chronological account of her experiences in the concentration camps. Everyone sat listening intently. A few days later, an article appeared in the local paper with the following byline: “After 64 years, Jadwiga Lenartowicz-Rylko, the oldest physician of Łódź’s Janusz Korczak Hospital, returns…to rediscover memories of her hospital.”

7 Kaminsky is quoting from an unpublished conference paper, but Myerhoff (1992:291) used the same idea, when she wrote about the emergence, in ethnographic text, of a “third person…born by virtue of the collusion between interlocutor and subject.”

8 Recent efforts toward compensation of Nazi victims have underscored this complicity and brought into sharper focus the extent to which this history had been largely erased (Authors
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9While accounts exist of what life was like for refugees during and in the aftermath of World War II (e.g., Berger 2001, Bourguignon 1998, Hoffman 1989), this is an under explored aspect of that history. One reason may be that “in relation to the Holocaust, emigration seemed so much the lesser upheaval,” and yet, this “uprooting [is] an almost intrinsic part of the Holocaust’s aftermath” (Hoffman 2004:77, 78).

10As cited and discussed in Bauer (2001:59, 283, 284).


12The memoir, titled Juz więcej nie będzie wojny (There will be no more wars) was written in 1946, by Aliza Besser, neé Lipszyc, and deposited in the Yad Vashem Archives as No. 03/3394.

13Hoffman notes that the non-Jewish population was largely preoccupied during the war with their own dangers and survival. At the same time, this “averted gaze” was fostered by a long history of pervasive anti-Semitism in Poland that was fanned by right-wing nationalists during the economic and political instabilities of the 1930s (Steinlauf 1997).

14Similar experiences and feelings of anguish are recorded in memoirs and poetry written by other survivors of Ravensbrück (Binder 2000, Morrison 2000:32-33).

15The fact that Jadzia was repeatedly put in the position of being a prisoner-doctor to Jewish slave laborers, when placed against the background of policies such as the Final Solution and “extermination through work,” raises perplexing questions about why the Nazis even bothered to provide medical services in the camps, and especially in extermination camps.

16There is a postscript to this story, a literal bringing of the past into the present. In March, 2001, I assisted my mother in submitting a claim to the German Forced Labor Compensation Programme (set up in 2000 by the German Foundation Act), with funds coming equally from the German government and from German companies (see endnote 8). Unlike Philippe Bourgois’ father, whose claim was rejected despite the fact that he was imprisoned in Auschwitz, my mother did meet the criteria of “good-enough victimhood,” as Bourgois puts it in his essay in this collection (101). She was notified in August, 2002 of an “Award for Slave Labor,” accompanied by an initial payment of US $3,737.29. At the age of 94, she is still awaiting the smaller second, final installment of this “compensation.”

17Questions are being raised about the role that doctors and other medical personnel have played in the human rights abuses that have recently been documented in U.S. military prisons in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantanamo Bay (Lifton 2004, Miles 2004).

18There is a growing body of anthropological literature that focuses on the causes, structures, experience, and aftermath of violence in all its forms; only a few examples of such work have been cited in this essay.

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