Collaborative Witnessing of Survival During the Holocaust: An Exemplar of Relational Autoethnography

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Abstract

In this article, a researcher and collaborator present stories about the second author's survival during the Holocaust. They propose that their approach of collaborative witnessing is a form of "relational autoethnography" that allows researchers to focus on and evocatively tell the lives of others in shared storytelling and conversation. The authors address the benefits and complications of collaborative witnessing and how it extends an autoethnographic perspective in its emphasis on writing for and with the other, listening and working together with care and compassion, and bearing witness to others as well as to oneself.

Keywords

collaborative witnessing, collaborative autoethnography, autoethnography, relational autoethnography, Holocaust, oral history, testimony, listening

My suffering and my experiences are just a microcosm of what the rest of the Jews in Europe experienced. So I’m pleased that I have the opportunity to share it... What you’re doing [with your class, interviews, and writing] bodes well for humanity, not only for Jews or the Holocaust, but for all people because what happened to Jews is now happening to others... What you’re doing can possibly help, if anything can, because arms will not do it and rivals will not stop it. But understanding of human beings, one to one, may prevent tragedies like the Holocaust from happening again. (Jerry Rawicki, Holocaust survivor, May 11, 2011, transcript)

In this article, survivor Jerry Rawicki and I present stories about his survival during the Holocaust. We propose that our approach of collaborative witnessing is a form of “relational autoethnography” that allows researchers to focus on and evocatively tell the lives of others in shared storytelling and conversation. We address the benefits and complications of collaborative witnessing and how it extends an autoethnographic perspective in its emphasis on writing for and with the other, listening and working together with care and compassion, and bearing witness to others as well as to oneself.

The Collaborative Process: History of Our Work Together

At the age of twelve, Jerry Rawicki was deported from Plock, Poland to a ghetto in the small town of Bodzentyn, Poland. He and his sister escaped Bodzentyn, taking considerable risks as they hid in forests, then passed as non-Jewish on public transportation. They made their way to Warsaw, where Jerry rejoined his father in the Warsaw Ghetto while his sister lived as a Gentile in the City. From the age of fourteen to sixteen, Jerry acted as a courier between the Jewish resistance and Polish underground. After surviving the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 1943, he passed as a Roman Catholic in Poland for the remainder of the war. He moved to New York in February 1949, then worked in various parts of the country as an optician, met his wife Helene in Pittsburgh in 1956, and then they retired to Florida in the mid-1990s.

For much of my academic life, I (Carolyn) have written about coping with loss, trauma, and grief, usually my own—for example, coping with the anticipatory grief of losing a partner from chronic illness (Ellis, 1995), the trauma of my brother's early death in an airplane accident (Ellis, 1993), and the assistance needed by my elderly mother (Ellis, 2001). Thus I jumped at the opportunity to interview survivors in conjunction with the University of South Florida Libraries Holocaust and Genocide Center and the Florida Holocaust Museum. What better way to learn

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about coping with loss than talking with survivors who not only experienced unimaginable trauma but have had to live with these memories for more than sixty years.

In this larger project, several PhD students (Chris Patti, Tori Lockler, Ellen Klein, and David Purnell) and I interviewed forty-five survivors living in the Tampa Bay area. All of the interviews were digitized, and transcripts and audio are available on the University of South Florida Libraries website (http://guides.lib.usf.edu/content.php?pid=49131&sid=443218#). Not content to do traditional oral history interviews alone, early in this interviewing process, I decided to do follow-up conversational interviews with a small number of survivors who might be interested in continuing to talk about their experiences.

The first person I asked was Jerry. I could tell immediately in our initial interview—which took place in March 2009 and lasted for four hours—that Jerry had a passion for talking and thinking about the Holocaust, both from an historical and personal point of view. I also was impressed with how deeply he considered my questions and the emotional, insight, and careful attention to detail with which he told about his experiences. When Jerry enthusiastically replied to my invitation, we began conversing and have been meeting together ever since.

Listening to Jerry’s initial interview, I was struck by how often he faced situations where he could have been killed but managed somehow to survive. Jerry attributed his survival solely to luck, but his stories revealed to me a considerable degree of cunning and resourcefulness. I was curious about the persistence of his explanation and sought to understand how each event played out, how Jerry thought and acted, and the role that others played in his survival. Thus, in our follow-up conversations, I encouraged him to go into greater detail about what happened and how he escaped.

After I selected the stories of interest from the initial transcript, Jerry filled in details and provided additional stories in follow-up conversations. From these discussions, I wrote initial drafts, and together we coedited and revised these stories, passing them back and forth numerous times over a two-year period during 2009-2011 (see Ellis & Rawicki, in press). We held more than a dozen face-to-face meetings and exchanged e-mails, sometimes daily, during which we edited the stories and discussed their significance and meaning.

We have tried to be true to the spirit of the dialogue in which we engaged and to the descriptions of events that Jerry recalls experiencing during the Holocaust (Bochner, 2007; Ellis, 2009). In seeking to make our stories as meaningful as possible, we have revisited, reorganized, and revised our accounts along the way. We write in the present tense, adopting a literary sensibility to encourage readers to enter and recall the stories emotionally and cognitively (see Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Rawicki & Ellis, 2011).

Our responses to the story and our analysis take place in conversations since that form represents our collaborative process of working through the details of the stories and the ideas they generated. As the academic, I assumed I would take primary responsibility for asking questions and providing analysis of the stories. As the survivor, Jerry took charge of telling the stories, providing concrete details and the emotional context, and making sure our stories represented the “essence” of the events as truthfully as possible. During our collaborative sessions, I prodded Jerry, constantly asking for more information as we wrote and edited each story. In turn, Jerry challenged my interpretations, questioning how well they fit with his experience and understanding of what had taken place, and offering many of his own. By the end, our roles overlapped so that analysis joined with storytelling, with Jerry offering analytic insight and I, using all the details that Jerry provided, becoming a costoryteller.

**Becoming Collaborators: Writing Stories and Creating Meaning**

I follow Jerry through security into the Holocaust Museum, onto the elevator, and down the corridor past the Samuel Bak lithographs to the conference room, where we have held our meetings during the last two years. At eighty-three years old, Jerry is spry, suntanned, and appears younger than his years. I can imagine him as a young courier, carrying messages from and to Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, exchanging money and jewels for food with the non-Jewish Poles, and escorting children out of the Ghetto to be hidden.

I smile as I remember the first time we met to collaborate and how concerned I was about how we would write together. To write his stories evocatively, I knew we needed Jerry’s voice, passion, and detailed sense of his feelings, thoughts, and what happened—those same elements that have been so important in writing my own autoethnographic tales. I had to depend on Jerry to remember what happened and how he felt more than sixty years ago, when he was a young boy, as well as express his feelings and interpretations now. I couldn’t do this without him; I didn’t want to do it without him. How would this work? Could we become the kind of dialogic partners whose trust in each other would produce a meaningful and provocative collaboration?

Then suddenly at that first collaborative meeting when we are seated at the conference table, he said, “I read Final Negotiations last week.” I am surprised and appreciative that he would take the time to read about my loss (Ellis, 1995). I feel a kindred spirit with him as his misty eyes peer into mine. I swallow hard. “The images of your husband Gene being unable to breathe and you running for his oxygen hose have stayed with me,” Jerry says. “Reading your book makes me feel more comfortable telling you my stories because I know you have had experience with loss and grief. You too are a survivor.” With that my anxiety diminished. I realized Jerry and I were in this together, and I felt
confident that we would figure out how to accomplish the task we had set for ourselves.

And we had. Now, two years later at this meeting, there is an ease of friendship and trust forged through sharing intimate details of life, crying and laughing together. I hand Jerry the latest version of what we have written together.

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From Jew to Gentile to Anti-Semite: Get the Jew

It is early morning and I am fortunate to be marching with a labor group through the gate of the Warsaw Ghetto, the only way to get out of the walled-in Ghetto. I say fortunate because it is much better to be on the outside doing anything, even the heavy work sanctioned by the Germans, than locked behind those walls, where people are starving and dying on the streets. The air feels fresh, not stale like the suffocating ghetto air permeated with death.

“Today seems like a good day to separate from the group.” I tell myself. The word has gone out that the gate is “playing,” which means someone has been able to bribe the German guards, who now pay little attention to us as we exit through the gate.

Once we are on the Polish side, the next obstacle is the Polish police, who watch us as we march along the route to our work place. They too do not seem to be concentrating on us today. They are not necessarily our friends, but perhaps some of them are human enough that they don’t want to do us harm. Or maybe they just don’t want to be bothered today. Or perhaps someone bribed them as well. My “reading” better be right; otherwise I will be in deep trouble when I pull away from the group and make a dash for “freedom.”

The police will arrest me on the spot and I’ll be turned over to the Germans. I keep my eyes on the police, ready to change my plan quickly. Cautiously I slip my Jewish Star arm band from my sleeve and hide it in my hand. It is supposed to be sewn on, but I have unstitched mine so that I can remove it easily or put it back on if needed. Being caught without a band is punishable by death.

I position myself at the edge of the marching column so that I can make contact with the polis waiting outside the gate to do “business” with us ghetto Jews. As soon as we’re out of the gate, the Polish locals surround us. They grab at the “merchandise”—everything from woolen socks to jewels—they know we have brought out for barter. We rip the smuggled items from under our clothes and frantically exchange them for food—sometimes eggs, meat, or lox—anything we can strap under our clothes to bring back to the Ghetto after work that day.

As we continue marching to the work site, I cautiously separate myself from the group, slip my Jewish Star arm band into my pocket, and mingle with the crowd bartering with us. I sigh a deep breath of relief. The separation is now complete. I have transitioned from my role of a Jew bartering with the Gentiles into a Gentile bartering with Jews. Now comes the hard part: the threat from blackmailers who might be there lurking, trying to catch me, a sitting duck, because that’s what I am outside the Ghetto—a vulnerable, defenseless sitting duck.

I move through the crowd that surrounds us. As I do, I feign boredom. “Hell with these dirty Jews,” I say, as though I am fed up and don’t want to barter anymore with them. Then I move away quickly.

Once among the crowd, I walk slowly and calmly. I’m free; free that is until I have to meet the work group and return to the Ghetto at the end of the day. I’m free, that is, if no blackmailers have seen me leave the group. I can’t appear frightened; but I can’t help glancing back. I know I can be turned in by a blackmailer and killed on the spot, but to get to the Polish side of Warsaw posing as a Gentile is worth the risk. Now I can interact “normally” with the Poles and go about my business. Still I have to be very cautious because somebody may have seen me leave the group and followed me.

Once outside the Ghetto, I often have assignments from the Jewish underground, such as to deliver communications that must not fall into the wrong hands. Blackmailers assume that if I risked passing as a Gentile I must have something important to do. Their goal is to figure out what I am up to and catch me at it, so they can blackmail me. All they have to do is threaten to turn me in and they have me at their mercy and can then take whatever goods I have on me. Of even greater value to them is to follow me and blackmail people I’ve led them to. Finding well-to-do Jews in hiding outside the Ghetto is a bonanza, because the blackmailers can make large amounts of money by threatening to turn them in. But it isn’t always just money they are after. Sometimes they try to catch us just for sport or because they hate Jews so intensely.

Today, my job is to bring back food from the market for the people in the Ghetto and I clutch the money they have given me to make purchases.

Suddenly a big man approaches me. Something about his movements makes me tense up and change directions. I don’t know why. After all, my non-Jewish features should help me blend into the crowds of Poles in the streets of Warsaw. I think I am safe when suddenly I sense his menacing presence. I turn and see him about twenty to thirty feet behind me following my every move. To get away, I change directions, first slowly then frantically. With a sense of a stalked animal, I know he is a szmalcownik [blackmailer]. Sadly, I know that a blackmailer, like a hungry carnivore closing in on its kill, will recognize a Jew.

My evading tactics fail. I hear the dreaded blood curdling Tam Żyd leci. Tam Żyd leci. [A Jew is running there. A Jew is running there. Let’s get the Jew.] Other voices join the pursuit, and I take off running as fast as my small
and wiry, fifteen-year-old body will move. Though I know I can outrun the big man, I am afraid I can’t outrun what suddenly has become a full-blown chase. As I zigzag through the crowded streets, I am mindful that the stupefied pedestrians gawking at the bedlam might trip me or in some other way help the big man catch me. I run on anyway, since this seems to be my only hope. Breathless now, I suddenly extend my hand forward, pointing and screaming, “A Jew is running there. A Jew is running there. Get the Jew.”

“Gdzie?” [Where?] The befuddled pedestrians take off running beside me. So now a small group is running down the street, with the big blackmailer way behind us.

At the top of my lungs I yell, “Tam Żyd leci,” [over there], “over there, a Jew’s running there,” still pointing in the direction we are headed.

“Get the Jew,” reverberates around me as I slow down and duck into a courtyard. As I had hoped, the courtyard let out to another street and to safety. I try to compose myself, slow my breathing back to normal, and crawl into a cocoon of anonymity in hopes of living another day.

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“Wow. Wow. I just love this story,” I say, revealing my pleasure at Jerry’s cunning get away. “I love how you outsmarted those chasing you.”

“Yes, I was very slick,” says Jerry, his index finger extended still, pointing to the imaginary Jew he was chasing.

“You had to think on your feet and survive with your feet when your Aryan appearance was not enough to protect you,” I say, turning to my analytic mode. “You knew that a courtyard had two openings and was a good place to hide. You understood danger and figured out on the spot a way out of the situation. Your yelling, ‘there’s a Jew running’ was brilliant. How did you know to do that?”

“I knew I was in trouble because this man was chasing me,” says Jerry, “and this was unusual enough that bystanders would pay attention. If they joined with the blackmailer, I wouldn’t have had a chance. Given the anti-Semitism in Poland, the best way to get attention off me was to direct them to an imaginary Jew. I figured repeating ‘there’s a Jew’ in the middle of Warsaw would electrify people. They’d wonder, what is a Jew doing here? If I’d said, ‘there is somebody running over there’, nobody would have paid any attention, but the word ‘Żyd’ was like the plague, something dirty and repugnant.”

“You were able to figure out how to make that identity work. You knew what to do and say to pass and how to implement it,” I say.

“This all makes me sound smarter than I was,” says Jerry. “Really I acted without much thought. It wasn’t like I was making a rational decision. I was just a crazy, happy-go-lucky kid trying to survive another day.”

Jerry sighs and holds back tears, indicating the strong feeling that thinking about himself as a child in danger engendered in him. His emotions lead me to feel for Jerzy, the spontaneous fifteen-year-old kid, as well as Jerry, the wise eighty-three-year-old man in front of me.

Smuggling People

“Life was even more complicated when I had to smuggle out people,” Jerry says. “On occasions I had to accompany ten- to twelve-year-old kids whose parents had arranged to get them out of the Ghetto to be hidden by someone on the Polish side. I helped them to unobtrusively take off their armbands, instructed them to act normally, and then we both had to blend into the crowds and find our way without calling attention to ourselves. That was way more dangerous than going it alone.”

“Did you ever get caught trying to smuggle someone out of the ghetto?”

“No, but there were many close calls, one in particular.”

While I wait for Jerry to begin his story, I am mesmerized with how he had to be willing to take risks, understand the risks he was taking, and adeptly read the signs that alerted him to what was going on. Deep in thought, Jerry breathes deeply and begins.

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Once we leave the Ghetto and successfully pass over to the Gentile side, we walk to the streetcar. Young urchins like me seldom pay the fare; usually we jump on the open-air streetcar when the conductor isn’t watching, and jump off if he tries to approach us. But this time I pay because I don’t want to draw attention.

Because only a few people are on the streetcar, it is hard to hide from the conductor’s view. When he keeps staring at us, I get the sense he thinks something fishy is going on. Though I have no distinctive Jewish features, the boy looks Jewish. I am afraid he will ask the boy a question, and his Jewish-accented Polish will give him—and us—away. As the car moves slowly around the bend, I gently push the boy out of the streetcar, and then say to the conductor, “I think that was a Jew. He sounded like a Jew.” As soon as I can, I jump off the streetcar and run back to get the boy, who is still standing where I pushed him off. He doesn’t understand why I did this to him, has no idea where he is, and doesn’t know what to do.

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Jerry’s eyes fill with tears and he dabs at them with a Kleenex. “Why does this make you emotional?” I ask.

“Maybe because I am thinking how this poor kid must have felt—I can feel his fear. I don’t usually tell this story
I’m reminded of a quote often attributed to Thomas Jefferson, thing you did rather than those that were bestowed on you. You used your appearance and good health to your advantage. Isn’t it important to consider the agentic as well as the non-agentic factors in survival? For you or any of us—is completely random. Certainly you ascribe everything to luck, then that means that survival—

“Seems to me luck was everything,” Jerry repeats. “I didn’t know what I was doing half the time. Yet I survived.” Sensing that more than luck was involved, I reply, “It seems to me that the details you provide about your thoughts, feelings, and actions in these situations serve to reveal some of the factors that intersected luck. For example, good physical and mental health, physical ability, youth, and an Aryan appearance allowed you to hide your Jewish identity and made it possible to maneuver through dangerous situations, such as running from the blackmailer, moving out of the workgroup, and talking to the conductor on the trolley.”

“Isn’t it true though,” Jerry continues, “that it was lucky that I was a little kid, looked the way I did, enjoyed good health, had some abilities, and was smart enough to figure out what to do in dangerous situations?”

“You could say that,” I concur. “But if you’re going to ascribe everything to luck, then that means that survival—for you or any of us—is completely random. Certainly you had to be lucky to survive, but your stories also show skillful adaptation, circumspection, intelligence, and insight. You used your appearance and good health to your advantage. Isn’t it important to consider the agentic as well as the non-agentic factors in survival?”

“What do you mean by agentic factors?” asks Jerry.

“Those characteristics that you acquired through something you did rather than those that were bestowed on you. I’m reminded of a quote often attributed to Thomas Jefferson, ‘I’m a great believer in luck. The harder I work, the more of it I seem to have.’ In these situations of danger, your personal characteristics were enhanced by ethnographic sensibilities that you developed in the face of danger.”

“What do you mean by ethnographic sensibilities?” Jerry asks.

“Ethnographic sensibilities are similar to what Levi (1989) meant when he called the concentration camp ‘a university’. ‘It taught us to look around and to measure men,’ Levi (p. 141) wrote. The same happened for you in the Ghetto and when you were passing as non-Jewish in the streets of Warsaw. You examined the situation and determined what needed to be done. You read the situation and quickly had a holistic, panoramic view.’

“I was circumspect and pragmatic,” says Jerry. “Is this what you mean?”

I nod. “Yes. Not only did you have to read each situation, you had to implement each individual move to make these transitions successfully. Not only did you have to read others correctly, but you also had to act in such a way that others read you the way you wanted. The result was that you could smell danger, sense evil, read threatening situations well, and respond quickly, often before anyone realized you were Jewish.”

Jerry sits quietly, eyes to the ceiling, and I can tell he is considering my explanation. “I guess I did have to be able to figure out when the guards were playing, which work group to join, and when it was safe to move among the Poles in the marketplace.”

“Exactly,” I respond. “And I guess it was helpful—whether bestowed or acquired—that you could run so fast and were so athletic.”

“Those skills came in handy,” Jerry acknowledges, excited to be telling me about his successful adventures. “Once while I was in the Ghetto and heard the Germans coming, I fled to the attic of an abandoned building. Stretching to reach out the wall opening, I grabbed the edge of the roof with frozen hands and hauled myself up. There was no safety net, nothing to keep the Germans still on the street from seeing me. Blinded by ice and snow, I struggled to keep my balance on the wickedly slanted roof. I stretched out and didn’t move for hours and hours. I dozed in and out of consciousness, hallucinating from my exhaustion. Then finally I got off the roof when night was approaching” (Rawicki, 2007, pp. 24-26).

“Another time in the Ghetto uprising, I escaped through a hole in a thick wall where only three or four bricks were missing. My gymnastic and track training before the war probably helped me in both cases,” Jerry says, quietly acknowledging some agency, “but to this day I don’t know how I managed to get my body through that small space—especially since I’m claustrophobic, or maybe that experience made me claustrophobic—or how I defied the laws of gravity and physics to hold myself on the roof.”

“Usually though I used other techniques and didn’t have to resort to running or gymnastics,” Jerry says. “For example, when blackmailers approached me and accused me of being a Jew, I gave them the few things I had and sometimes they’d let me go. Other times I would deny I was a Jew, or I would assert myself in the vilest possible language, cursing and saying things like, ‘I’m no dirty Jew.’ I talked myself out of the situation by being indignant. I learned very early that sometimes the best defense is offense.”

“I also had to be willing to appear as anti-Semitic, just as I had when I mentioned the ‘dirty Jews’ as I bargained in the marketplace and when I told the conductor I thought the
boy I pushed off the trolley was Jewish. Most Jews could not have passed as I did, and of those who could, many would not have been willing to act in those ways."

“You actually used their anti-Semitism against your enemy,” I say.

“I did, but this makes it all sound too planned out and rational,” Jerry argues. “Much of what I did seemed to be the only choice I had at that moment...”

“Or the only one you could think of,” I interrupt.

Jerry nods. “One time none of this worked. I was spotted at the Iron Gate, the biggest marketplace in Warsaw, by some blackmailers who suspected I was Jewish. I thought it was all over for me. I prayed for a miracle and my prayer was answered.”

I sit back in my chair, ready to hear another story.

Saved by the Skin of My Teeth

Similar to a flea market, the Iron Gate is lined with stalls and stands of clothing, trinkets, and food—my interest—such as fish, meat, and eggs. I usually buy provisions from the same man each day for my fellow marketplace, who entrust me with their money. Then I bring the items to the worksite and each worker is responsible for smuggling them past the guards at the gate into the Ghetto for their families.

This particular day, I have hired a bicycle-pulled rickshaw. I load everything I bought on the cart, and I sit in front with the driver. As we are leaving the market to head back to the railroad station, where I will meet the other workers and go back into the Ghetto, two big muscular men—about thirty-years old—approach us. What can I do? As a small boy, I can't escape with the supplies. I am in trouble.

“Hey, Żyd [Jew], get off,” one of them says. He pushes me off the rickshaw, takes my seat, and rides off with the driver. The other big man says, “Okay, Żyd, let's go.” He pushes me toward a house near the marketplace and follows me all the way up into the attic. After making me take off my shirt and shoes, he orders, “Take off your pants.” He knows that Jews often have money hidden under our clothes, but I have spent all mine to buy provisions.

Since I keep insisting I am not a Jew, I don't want to take off my pants and reveal I am circumcised. He will really have me then. Who knows what he might do? But the most important reason I don't want to remove my pants is that I have sewn in the band of my underwear the telephone number of my sister who is passing as a Gentile in Warsaw. I fear for her life. The whole time this is happening, I am thinking, “Oh god, if he kills me, he kills me. Just don't find the phone number.”

“Take what I have,” I tell him, handing him the change in my pockets. “That’s all I have.” Then I see two other guys enter the attic and I say to myself, “Oh, this is going to be bad.” I think this might be the end of the trail for me. With one man, maybe I can talk my way out of it, but with three, I don’t have a chance.

Jerry chokes back the tears as he tells the story. “I thought I was going to be killed,” he says. I place my hand on his arm and wait until he is ready to continue with the story.

“Hey, this is my Jew,” the big guy holding me says to the two approaching men, and I realize that at least they aren't in this together.

Surprisingly the two men start pummeling the big guy holding me and almost kill him.

“Get dressed and get out of here,” they say to me. I scoot out as fast as I can.

“Who were those rescuers?” I ask. “That’s something I’ve been wondering about ever since that happened,” Jerry says, shaking his head. “I’ve always thought they were sent by the merchant I had been doing business with. He never let on he suspected I was Jewish, but he must have seen the blackmailers approach the rickshaw and knew I was in big trouble.”

“This wasn’t the end of my adventures that day,” Jerry says. “Later I got help from another unlikely source.” Intrigued by the smile on Jerry’s face, I nod for him to continue.

Sheltered by a Prostitute

When I get back to the train depot, my work group already has returned to the Ghetto. Given how late it is, I know that the Ghetto gates will be closed and I will not be able to return that night. I am stranded on the outside and without money.

So I’m standing forlornly in front of the locked gate smack in the middle of the Red Light District where the Germans prowl for prostitutes. Few people are on the street, but I recognize Vera, a prostitute who is often looking for business.

“Come here,” she calls, nodding her head invitingly.

I cross the street. As a fifteen-year-old-virgin, I get pretty flustered and say, “I don't have any money.”

Ignoring my statement, she asks in a friendly tone, “The men left. What will you do?”

“I don’t know,” I probably look dejected.

“Come upstairs with me,” she says.

“I’m still thinking she wants my money. I’m thinking that maybe I can get something on credit. [Jerry laughs.] I follow her upstairs. She opens the door into a tiny kitchen in a tiny apartment. I immediately feel claustrophobic, like I
am caught. I look around for an escape hatch, but there is none. I can smell food cooking and in front of the stove I see a mattress on the floor. She calls out “mother” and a woman comes out of the back room, probably assuming her daughter has a client. The mother is maybe 50 or 60, which is an old lady to me. The appearance of the heavy, gray-haired woman wearing an apron contrasts with the thin and pretty daughter dressed in fancy clothes. The daughter explains to her mother what happened and tells her she’ll have to sleep with me. That, of course, is a big disappointment to me. [Jerry chuckles again.] Fully clothed, I walk to the back room and slide under the down comforter with the fully-dressed mother. I can hear Vera talking and making sounds. I guess she got a client after we went to bed.

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“What are you feeling as you lie in bed that night?” I ask.

“I have a lot of mixed emotions. I feel gratitude that they are helping me, mixed with sexual excitement and fear that I will be caught. I know I have to be on guard at all times, to figure out who might want to harm me. What if Vera is with a German man? What if she decides to tell him that she knows where he can get a Jew, to make a few more zlotys? Can I trust her in this situation? I felt trapped and hardly slept a wink.”

“How did you know to trust Vera in the first place?” I ask.

“I didn’t really. It was part of life then to be suspicious of everybody at all times,” Jerry says. “Is this person going to do me harm or do right by me? With Vera, I felt I had no other choice, but I also trusted my instincts. And in this case, I was right, in spite of the questions that roamed through my head that night. Vera didn’t turn me in, and the next day I rejoined my group headed back into the Ghetto.”

“Wouldn’t the group have gotten into trouble because the number of workers returning wouldn’t have matched the number that left the Ghetto that morning?” I ask Jerry.

“Ordinarily you’re right, but this time, luckily, the guards were lax and not paying attention.”

I anticipate a successful ending to this story, until I see the concern building on Jerry’s face, as he continues with the surprise ending.

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When I get back to the people who had given me money to buy supplies and explain to them what happened, they don’t believe me.

“Give us our money back, you dirty rotten thief,” they say. Though they vent their anger and abuse me verbally, thankfully they don’t carry out their threats of bodily harm.

After being robbed of all the staples I had collected and nearly paying with my life, I don’t dare go back to the same marketplace. Besides, the Jews in the Ghetto don’t trust me with their money after that. It is a very, very traumatic day for me.

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We sit in silence as Jerry breathes deeply to keep the tears from falling. He clears his throat several times, blows his nose, and dabs his eyes with a wadded up Kleenex. It is hard for me to imagine a fifteen-year-old boy being in the circumstances he is in with so much responsibility and feeling everyone is against him with no one to turn to.

“We were ever late for the gate again?” I ask, breaking the silence.

“Oh yes, let me tell you another story about what happened,” and with that Jerry enthusiastically launches into another story.

**Late for the Gate**

It all starts one terribly cold day in the fall or early winter in 1942. As my father and I are waiting to cross Zamenhofa, the main street in the Ghetto, a hansom cab goes by—one of those enclosed Droschkes [horse-drawn carriages], as we called them. “Who was that?” I ask, when my father waves at someone. “A man I worked with before the war,” Father replies. “What’s his name?” I ask. After saying the name, my father adds as an afterthought, “He is in charge of a group that works outside the Ghetto.” Frankly, neither the man’s name or position is of any interest to me, and my father’s words are lost on me in the pelting mess of rain and snow.

Sometime later that fall I am outside the Ghetto on an assignment for the Jewish underground. The task takes longer than I think it will, and I don’t get back in time to join my group. Now I am in trouble because the only way to get out or back through the gate into the Ghetto is with a working group under the control of an official escort. When those escorts are “on a take,” as they sometimes are, they are relatively easy on us, but most of the time they are a mean, murderous bunch. I take a streetcar toward a general vicinity of a Niska Street Ghetto gate that I know. I decide to take my chances there since, in the past, I have found that gate handling a great deal of Ghetto traffic.

It is evening and the temperature has dropped below freezing. Floodlights bathe the plaza leading to the gate as if a festive parade is expected. Hiding in a courtyard of an abandoned building, I do indeed see a parade, though it is anything but festive. What I see is frantic and gruesome, uncontrolled chaos behind a curtain of snow. Through the blur of snowflakes, formations of workers line up and wait to enter the Ghetto. The gate is “not playing” that night, which means the guards most likely will be vicious. Frightened and overwhelmed by the menacing scene, I decide to wait until things quiet down.
The temperature drops some more and scrambles my senses until I’m barely aware of what is going on in the plaza. The cacophony of shrieks from the men and women being beaten by the guards, the booming commands from the guards’ megaphones, and the howling wind keep me awake. Yet my eyelids close on their own so tightly that I have to pry them open with my fingers. I fear I’ll freeze to death. Through the sheets of snow suddenly I see or imagine—I’m not sure which—a group marching towards me. I dart toward them, and when I see they are real, I drop in formation to march with them.

The people in the group realize that I do not belong to their outfit. Painfully aware that the gate is not playing that night, they yell and scream, “Get him out! He’s a danger!” Some ask for quiet, but they are in the minority. Others kick me and try to push me out. They know that if the manifest in the morning shows a certain number of people going out, there must be the same number of people returning, not one less or one more.

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“If the gate wasn’t playing, how did your initial group get back in without you?” I interrupt, a question I also had about the night Jerry spent with the prostitute.

“Maybe the gate they left from was guarded by different personnel later that day, or maybe they went through a different gate. Maybe the group’s leader was able to negotiate with the guards and that particular gate was playing after all. I couldn’t say.”

“And how do you know when the gate is not playing?” I ask.

“You might see the guards sporadically beating people who want to get through the gate, as I already have described, or confiscating possessions that they deem of value. At the worst, there might be a carnage where guards kill people at random without the slightest provocation.”

“Oh, my,” I say, visualizing the mayhem, as I nod for Jerry to continue his story.

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The man elected by the group as spokesman hears the commotion and comes to the rear. Pointing to me, the people yell, “This guy came in from nowhere. He’ll get us killed!” “He is an angel of death.” “Get him out.” The man grabs my arm and shoulder, ready to yank me out of the formation. Without looking up, without thinking, with my teeth chattering, barely able to move my lips, I say my name, “I’m Jerzy Rawicki.” Nothing more. I don’t know what makes me say this. Instantaneously I feel the grip on my arm loosen, and I’m being pushed back into the group. The spokesman orders everybody to shut up and the next thing I hear when I’m in the “safety” of the Ghetto is the man saying to me, “You are Abram’s son, right?”

As I nod, he continues. “I’m from Plock. I used to work with your father. How is he?”

The man says these words as if saving my life is a non-issue.

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“So he was the man your father waved to in the hansom cab?” I ask.

Jerry nods. “I feel certain he was. Frankly, hearing him tell me where he was from or who he worked with did not register with me then. I was just euphoric to be alive and safely home. The deus ex machina, the miracle, did not dawn on me at the moment.” (Bochner, 2012b)

“But now,” Jerry continues, “from the vantage point of nearly seventy years, I can see how supernaturally, strangely, and exquisitely a father’s love can save a son’s life.”

“Aided as well by a man who recognized you and decided to intervene on your behalf,” I add. “Both here and when you were taken to the attic by the blackmailers.”

“That goes without saying,” Jerry says. “Many times I was saved by the actions of others, especially when the Germans came to town. The first was when we were first evacuated from our homes. I remember what happened like it was yesterday.”

I nod and wait for the story.

Almost Shot by a German

I am in the middle of reading a very interesting book, The Citadel by [A. J.] Cronin, when the Germans come in. A German soldier knocks the book out of my hand, and when I pick it up, he does it again. Our family is able to gather a few possessions before we rush down the stairs from our third floor apartment to wait outside in the freezing rain. Around midnight we line up in front of our building, as ordered, with our few belongings, to wait to be transported. Where, we don’t know.

We live on Szeroka Street, which means Broad Street, and the street is indeed broad, divided by a median of grass. Quickly, I am bored with standing and waiting, and begin arguing with my mother who wants me to behave and not draw the Germans’ attention. Suddenly I see my good friend, Moniek Nirinberg, who, like us, has lined up on the other side of the street. Ignoring the patrolling Germans, I decide. “I’m going to see my friend.” I am already on the median when I hear my mother yell, “Come back!” At the same time, I also see a German running towards me with a bayonet-tipped rifle. I sense he too wants me to return, and I quickly run back to my mother. When the German catches up with me, he holds the tip of his bayonet close to my face, almost touching it. My mother says something—I don’t remember what—but in response the German lowers his
rifle and walks away. Finally, at dawn we are loaded on the flatbed trucks that arrive, and they take us away.

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“How frightened your mother must have been,” I say.

“At the time I didn’t realize how serious my behavior was, but now I think that I must have petrified her. Though I doubt if she was as scared then as another time later when I was almost shot. By then we knew just how vicious the Germans could be.”

“How could it get any worse?” I ask.

“Oh it could, and it did,” Jerry replies.

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After we leave Plock, we end up in a small ghetto without walls in Bodzentyn, Poland. Though there is no German garrison in this particular town, the town is serviced, so to speak, by the battalion from Bielany, a little town about twenty-five miles away. Once a week, the German gendarmes [military police] arrive and bring a day of carnage to Bodzentyn. Though we are allowed to walk in the street in the ghetto area, nobody dares go out when the gendarmes come.

On this particular day, a German by the name of Dunkle arrives. He is easily recognized because he has a lame leg. In Germany, disabled people are persona non grata and relegated to the lower class. But Dunkle is very valuable to the Germans because he is a born killer. When he and his murderous gang are in town, we know at least one or two people are going to be killed.

That afternoon we all are looking out the windows from the storefront where we lived to see what will happen. I don’t know what makes me do it, but I jump out the door. I had been a prankster before the war and some of this carried over. Dunkle spots me. My poor, stunned mother, who is looking through the window, sees him take me by the collar and push me around the corner toward a tavern.

Dunkle enters the tavern pushing me in front of him. Without saying a word, he takes out his pistol. I don’t think I realized what was happening. The owner, who does know what is about to transpire, comes out from behind the bar. She knew me because occasionally I had helped her sweep and clean things. In a joking voice, she says to Dunkle, “Hey, what are you doing? I just had my floor cleaned.” Still holding onto me, Dunkle has his pistol pointed at my head. “Come on, get a drink,” she cajoles him, while to me she says forcefully, “Get the hell out!” and she kicks me. Dunkle lets go of me and I bolt out. When I get back to our storefront, my mother gives me a well-deserved beating.

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“The tavern owner saved your life,” I say.

“She sure did,” Jerry replies, “at the risk of losing hers. That happened several times—that I survived because others acted to save me,” Jerry enumerates, “The tavern owner with her quick thinking, my mother with her words when I ran across the street to see my friend, the unknown man who saved me when I was captured in the marketplace, the prostitute who rescued me when I was alone on the street, and the leader of the group I joined to return to the Ghetto who kept me from being killed right then and there.”

“What was it about you that made people around you want to look out for you?” I ask.

“It’s probably just because I was a young boy.”

“But not all young boys in the Ghetto had that kind of protection. Some researchers argue that children were the most vulnerable” (Valent, 1998).

“I don’t think there was anything about me in particular. It was luck that these particular folks happened to be who and where they were. Each situation could have turned out differently,” Jerry says.

“So you still don’t think you had anything to do with your survival?” I ask.

“Not really, though . . .” Jerry hesitates . . . “sometimes it was important to follow my instincts.”

“Give me an example,” I say.

“This one didn’t involve a weapon, but it was just as dangerous.”

Lured by Tropical Fruit at the Polski Hotel

After the Warsaw Ghetto is demolished into smithereens, a rumor circulates that the Germans have declared amnesty on Jews hiding outside of the Ghetto. They let it be known that they want to “let bygones be bygones.” Those who survived by hiding, the rumor mills say, are needed to exchange for German prisoners of war held in various South American countries. If we register, we will be taken to South America for such an exchange. So they set up a registration center in the Hotel Polski on Dluga Street so we can take advantage of this offer. When I hear that, I am, of course, a little incredulous. It sounds too good to be true. But as they say, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

So, I go to take a look. In the lounge of this hotel, the first thing that catches my eye is this big round coffee table covered with bananas, oranges, and other tropical fruit. When I touch what I think is artificial fruit and see that it is real, I feel the heat of the fires during the Ghetto uprising and smell the odor of burning flesh that lingers even now in my nostrils. “Is this real?” I ask myself. For a moment, I think about how lucky I am to be able to go to South America. As a kid I always loved geography and imagined myself going to faraway and exotic places. Then I realize how eerie it is to see people
A Common Man Trying to Survive

“Can you explain to me how you knew something wasn’t right even before you saw the men? I guess what I’m asking is, how did your ‘instincts’ work?”

“I think here and in several of the stories I’ve told you that I had this acquired sense of danger, like the wildebeests you see on the Discovery Channel, and I used my cunning to save my life. I felt like a hunted animal. I think any human in a situation like this will develop a sixth sense. I don’t think I was special; many people in the Holocaust learned to use their cunning to get themselves out of situations.”

“Yes, a Wildebeest doesn’t count on luck,” I say. “A Wildebeest depends on intuition and instinct, on his capacity to sense danger. Yours became more developed and kicked in more quickly than it might have in people who had not experienced dangerous situations.”

“Yes, and then my actions triggered the endorphins in my brain and made me feel capable of doing things that normally I wouldn’t have been able to do, like running fast, holding onto the roof, and escaping through seemingly impenetrable openings.”

“The amygdala kicks in when you are in danger,” I say. “You react before you think about what to do. Then the cognitive part of the brain provides more information. You were in so many dangerous situations that these neural pathways may have become more developed.”

“Yes, oh yes,” Jerry agrees. “It’s like evolution speeded up. Under normal circumstances it might have taken years to deepen some of these sensitivities.”

“This makes me think about how the Nazis accused the Jews of being non-human animals and did everything they could to turn their victims into animals. I also see the contrast of Levi’s (1989) and others’ description of the negative aspects of being ‘animalistic’ with your portrayal of the positive aspects. Having been constructed and treated as an ‘animal,’ you had to develop the instincts of a beast to survive. As you mentioned before, many Jews probably might not have been able to—or perhaps could not bring themselves to—become ‘other than human’ because of such factors as age, illness, or religious and moral beliefs. Thus they did not develop the adaptations you did. For survivors and many of us trying to understand survival, luck is a more satisfying and humane explanation than ‘becoming animalistic’ for what people sometimes had to do or be to survive.”

“Okay, now I have a question for you,” Jerry says. “How do you explain my blurting out my name to the group leader when I was caught trying to get into the Ghetto? Where do my actions—my agency as you call it—fit in that story? How can you explain it?”

“Some things can’t be explained. They’re mysterious,” I say, beyond human explanation or understanding.

“Yes, almost like a miracle, supernatural,” says Jerry, smiling.

“A simple twist of fate,” we both say together, and decide to leave it at that.

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“I think we’ve done as much as we can with these stories,” Jerry says, as he adds one last correction to the almost finished text. I nod in agreement, as he sighs. “Trying to write about my survival in a literary form and portray my experiences to show the details of how they actually occurred has been emotionally more difficult than answering questions in a standard interview.”
Collaborative Witnessing as Relational Autoethnography

In this article, we have introduced collaborative witnessing as a form of relational autoethnography that allows researchers to focus on and evocatively tell the lives of others in shared storytelling and conversation. This approach fits with what I and others have claimed about autoethnography: it is about and for others as well as about and for the researcher (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010); it is a relational practice that asks that we enter the experience of the other as much as we think about the experience of the self (Ellis & Adams, in press); and it requires us to take others’ roles as fully as we can, and to consider why, given their histories and locations as well as their reflexive processes, they act on the world and respond the way they do.

Our efforts in collaborative witnessing have been influenced by qualitative researchers, oral historians, and feminists writing from a postmodern sensibility, especially those who advocate participation by all involved partners in the ethnographic process (see, for example, Gershon, 2009; Lassiter, 2005; Lawless, 1991; Marcus, 2007); those who share authority with interview respondents (see, for example, Frisch, 1990; Greenspan, 1998; Rubin & Greenspan, 2006); and those who participate in civic engagement and activism in their research (Lassiter & Campbell, 2010).

As well, collaborative witnessing bares similarities to other autoethnographically focused collaborative approaches where researchers write together from different perspectives about an experience, event, or social process. For example, in interactive interviewing (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997) multiple researchers serve in the dual capacity of interviewer and respondent as they examine a topic of mutual personal interest and experience and construct a coauthored story. Similarly, in unmediated coconstructed narratives, participants write and exchange stories that they then coconstruct together (Bochner & Ellis, 1995). In duoethnography (Norris, Sawyer, & Lund, 2012) multiple researchers juxtapose their own autoethnographic accounts about the research question and integrate their separate findings to provide multiple perspectives on a social phenomenon. In collaborative writing (Diversi & Moreria, 2010; Gale, Pelias, Russell, Spry, & Wyatt, 2012) multiple writers, who may not be in the same place or writing at the same time, coproduce an autoethnographic story. In collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013) several researchers write individual autoethnographies and simultaneously contribute their individual findings for collective analysis. In community autoethnography, personal experiences of researchers-in-collaboration illustrate how a community manifests particular social/cultural issues (e.g., Toyosaki, Pensoneau-Conway, Wendt, & Leathers, 2009).

These approaches differ somewhat in terms of the stage in which collaboration takes place, whether or not a primary investigator is in charge of collating the information for the study, how much emphasis is placed on individual and collective stories, importance of the analytic process, and kind of topics examined. But all these methods similarly involve researchers working and writing autoethnographically with other researchers, who generally have the same or similar audiences in mind as well as similar commitments, expectations, and objectives. Though some authors may desire to widen their audiences and goals, for the most part they intend primarily to speak to academic readers and contribute to academic research. Collaborative witnessing extends these collaborative autoethnographic approaches to lay participants and to audiences that include participants, their families, and similarly positioned collaborators in addition to academics. Moreover, the goal becomes one of compassion and caring as well as understanding and knowledge.

At the same time that close and involved partnerships formed in collaborative witnessing provide an opportunity to deepen relationships, they also pose challenges that must be addressed to do research well. For example, it is difficult to share authority, yet not ask too much of the people with whom you are working (Yow, 1997; see also Ellis & Rawicki, in press, for an in-depth discussion of this issue). It also is difficult to figure out how to write for multiple audiences that coauthors might address. For example, in my work with Jerry, the audience I wrote for initially was composed of Holocaust scholars. I sought to deconstruct luck and show the agency that underpinned the explanation of luck given almost universally as an answer to the question of how survivors survived (see also Berger, 1995, 2010). I thought that relying on luck as the sole explanation, as Jerry had done, resulted in buttressing the unfounded stereotype of Jews as passively failing to resist during the Holocaust. Thus I found myself trying to persuade Jerry to modify his strong conviction that his survival was simply a matter of luck.
While Jerry valued the research aspects of this project, his audience consisted of family members who had encouraged him to publish his stories, general readers who might pass on his stories to the younger generation, and other survivors who might react personally to his experiences. Most likely this audience had less interest in debates about luck and agency—or in the methodological arguments in this article—than they had in stories of Jerry’s experiences. As well, Jerry was attuned to the voices of his relatives who had been killed in the Holocaust. Similar to most Holocaust survivors (e.g., Levi, 1989, p. 50), he was intent on presenting himself without pretensions and making sure he took no credit for his survival. He was cautious not to imply that he might have had special skills or powers that those who died lacked. “That would be wrong,” he said, “just wrong.”

Jerry’s account of survival emphasized the luck of having certain characteristics and being at the right place—both for him and others who assisted him (see Rawicki & Ellis, 2012). My account acknowledged the role of luck but focused on Jerry’s agency in saving himself. Eventually our explanations began to merge as we acknowledged Jerry’s instincts, knowledge, and actions, yet ultimately saw survival in these and many other moments in his life as a mystery and at the mercy of fate.

While one of the goals in collaborative witnessing is to further understanding, this becomes secondary to the well-being of the participant, in ways that might not be necessary when participants are researchers and, in most cases, less vulnerable to hurtful consequences of research than are laypeople. The researcher in a collaborative witnessing project must constantly consider how the research impacts the participant, especially when the topic involves trauma, such as the Holocaust, and vulnerable populations, such as elderly survivors. For example, in my work with Jerry, I had to be aware of how telling stories was affecting Jerry, and figure out when to ask more questions, remain silent, wait for a response, or move on. I also considered how this work might be read by his family and affect other survivors. My guiding principle was to do no harm. I also hoped to add positively to Jerry’s life by listening and to survivors’ lives by offering stories that might be remembered in future generations.

In collaborative witnessing, a changing life situation of the participant may alter the research relationship and affect the project. For example, almost three years after we began working together, Jerry became a full-time caregiver for his wife who had pancreatic cancer. When she died a few months later, Jerry suffered both physically and emotionally. In June 2012, when I attended a gathering in memory of his wife, I was concerned by Jerry’s weight loss during his six months of caregiving and by how physically and emotionally fragile he had become. Since he was so busy and not often on e-mail during this period, our exchanges about our work were halted temporarily during the final writing of this article. When we communicated occasionally by phone, our primary topic of conversation became his recovery. As I sought to support him in his emotional loss and physical recovery, our relationship became one guided even more than it had been by friendship rather than the demands of research and coauthorship. Nevertheless, I was delighted—as was Jerry—when he recovered enough to renew our work relationship and respond to this article before final submission.

Thus collaborative witnessing makes use of “friendship as method” as developed by Tillmann-Healy (2003; see also, Brooks, 2006) and shares with that approach the strengths and demands of making the relationship a priority. Friendship as method allows for deep and emotional connection with the person being interviewed and the topic being investigated, but in turn requires us to acknowledge and respect the responsibilities of friendship: to be there when the person needs us but not make inappropriate demands; to nurture the relationship in whatever way is fitting and be willing to change when circumstances require it; to cope with whatever issues arise when aspects of friendship conflict with traditional ways of thinking about research; to handle issues of confidentiality, loyalty, and critique in the spirit of friendship as well as research; and not to exit the relationship when sufficient information has been obtained or research is no longer possible. In my relationship with Jerry, I did not consider “leaving the field; in fact, I never thought that I was ‘in the field’” in the first place. I have every intention to maintain my relationship with Jerry as long as he is willing and feels he can benefit from it.

Reflections on Bearing Witness to Self and Others

In collaborative witnessing, the roles of storyteller and story listener are intimately connected so that both become narrators together, to know and tell with each other in mutual engagement of hearts and minds joined together in long-term relationships and dialogic exchange, sharing as fully as possible both the construction of the stories and their meaning. I am now a character in Jerry’s life story, as he is in mine. We exist in each other’s stories, which always are self-other stories (Frank, 1995, p. 163), and we try to understand ourselves in the presence of the other.

I am a person Jerry speaks with and tells his story to in this present moment; I am a recipient and cocreator who allows myself to feel Jerry’s story; I am a person who speaks and listens empathically from a place of my own losses, and shares those losses when it seems appropriate; I am a person who tries to understand her own stories of loss as she listens to Jerry’s and to understand Jerry’s stories as much as she can through her own. In turn, Jerry tries to understand himself and his experience through the questions I ask, the
stories he tells, the emotions he feels, the experience I relate, and our conversational back and forth.

Witnessing stories about traumatic experiences requires “being with” the teller (Frank, 1995, p. 144), which means to allow oneself to be in communion with the other, and “attuned through preverbal resonance” (Halpern, 1993, p. 169, as cited in Frank, 1995, p. 144). Ultimately, this perspective asks us to not only live with but also in the stories we tell and hear from others. Though I understand that Jerry’s story is not my story, his experience is not my experience, and I cannot ever “know” his fully, I also feel that “learning how to deal with the end of life—like anything else we love—motivates us to listen actively, to enter into other people’s stories as if their experiences were our own or, at least, very close to us” (Kugelmass, 2007, p. x). With Jerry, I committed not only to be a listener but to be a co-storyteller, which means I had to do everything I could to put myself in his place (Jackson, 1995, p. 163), to feel resonance with his story and feel the story’s emotions and nuances (Frank, 1995, p. 158), and to learn why and how his stories matter to him. To successfully write the first drafts of Jerry’s stories and participate in the revisions, I found it necessary to try to look through his eyes, feel what he felt, and think what he thought. I had to write autoethnographically with Jerry as if I were a person in his story. One of the closest moments I had with Jerry was when he asked me to tell his story to an audience when he could not speak for fear of breaking down.

Dori Laub, a psychotherapist and Holocaust survivor who worked with other survivors, saw the listener to testimony as a participant and coowner of the shared traumatic stories, who partially experiences self-trauma as well. In order for the trauma to emerge in the form of testimony, Laub maintained that the listener must come to feel the bewilderment, confusion, pain, and dread that the trauma victim feels and must come to know the storyteller’s “victories, defeats and silences” from within (Laub, 1992, pp. 57-58). “For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other—in the position of one who hears” (Laub, 1992, p. 70; see also Greenspan, 1998; Patti, in press). At the same time, the listener is a separate being who also has to pay attention to the struggles going on inside. Thus the listener has to be simultaneously “a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to himself” (Laub, 1992, p. 58), which is what happened to me as I experienced Jerry’s stories.

As a witness, I claim activist motivation and therapeutic value for our autoethnographic endeavors (Ellis, 1995, 2002, 2004; Ellis & Adams, in press; Kiesinger, 2002; Poulos, 2008). Desiring to contribute to the betterment of life, I feel responsibility to unearth injustices and inequalities (Holman Jones, 2005), act on behalf of the good (Bochner, 2012b), and conduct myself as an “upstander” rather than a “bystander” to the wrongs in the world. I desire to assist in telling and meaning making by listening intimately and responding from my heart, and to offer companionship, compassion, and comfort to those whose memories are “too terrifying to remember in isolation” and too painful to be endured alone (Rubin & Greenspan, 2006; see also, Laub, 1992; Patti, in press). To be better equipped to bear witness to the pain and struggles of others, I feel it necessary to strive to understand and manage my own loss and grief.

I believe that my work with Jerry has helped me cope with my own suffering better as well as strengthened my capacity to care for the suffering of others (see Cole, 2007, p. 12). This work reinforces my desire to pass onto others the importance of bearing witness to our own and others’ trauma. In the work I do, I continue to seek truth—not in order to arbitrate what we know, but in order to know how to live (Bochner, 2012a, 2012b; Frank, 2004, p. 7; Jackson, 1995, p. 165). The best truth for that purpose is truth that exists “in the service of loving kindness” (Cole, 2007, p. 12), truth that relies on “understanding of human beings, one to one” and shares Jerry’s goal of preventing tragedies like the Holocaust from happening again.

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Notes

2. Of the 3,500 to 5,000 who fell into the trap, just one to two hundred are thought to have survived (see Goldstein, 2003, p. 176; and Shulman, 1982, p. 50).

3. See mediated coconstructed narrative, in which a researcher may work with lay participants to assist their coconstruction and understanding of a mutual experience (Bochner & Ellis, 1995). As well, in participatory action research, researchers work with laypeople on problem solving in the larger group rather than on listening to, understanding, and feeling compassion for individuals’ stories.

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**Carolyn Ellis** is professor of communication and sociology at the University of South Florida. Her most recent books include *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography; Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work; and Music Autoethnographies: Making Autoethnography Sing/Making Music Personal*. She has published numerous articles, chapters, and personal stories situated in emotions and interpretive representations of qualitative research, particularly autoethnography. Her current research focuses on compassionate listening to Holocaust testimonies and sharing authority in a collaborative, relational autoethnographic research process with first- and second-generation survivors.

**Jerry Rawicki** was twelve years old when Germany invaded Poland and he was deported from his native city of Plock to the small town of Bodzentyn. There, crowding, starvation, and typhus decimated the Jewish deportees. Together with his older sister, he made his way to the Warsaw Ghetto, where he became a courier between the budding Jewish resistance and the Polish underground. In April of 1943, he fought in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and escaped its smoldering ruins weeks after the Ghetto had fallen. With the help of forged identification provided by the Polish underground, he survived the remainder of the war as a Roman Catholic. He arrived in New York in 1949, where he became an optician, and then later retired to Florida. He was married for fifty-six years to his wife Helene, now deceased, and they have a son, daughter, and seven grandchildren. Jerry is the author of the novel, *Sins and Sorrow*, and several essays about his experiences during the Holocaust.