



INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

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INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA RYJKO-BAUER

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What sets your mother's experience apart from other WWII Holocaust stories?

A

First of all, this is not a Holocaust story—Jadwiga Helena Lenartowicz was a Polish Catholic. However, the Holocaust does frame part of her story, since much of her imprisonment by the Nazis was in Jewish camps. After her arrest, my mother was sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp and then transferred to the Jewish women's slave labor camp of Neusalz, where she worked as a prisoner-doctor. She endured a 42-day death march with her Jewish co-prisoners and spent the last month before liberation in yet another Jewish women's camp, Mehltheuer. This sets the book apart from many other accounts of World War II and the Holocaust. Less has been written about the Polish gentile experience under Nazi occupation. Many people assume that my mother was Jewish, because they are unaware that significant numbers of non-Jews were also sent to the Nazi camps. Through my mother's story, I describe what Poles endured—many were deported to forced labor camps or imprisoned in concentration camps—while at the same time honoring the Jewish tragedy. All too often the Jewish and Polish Christian narratives of this period are in conflict and I wanted to bring these two memories closer together.

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What were some of the challenges of interviewing your mother in her later years?

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The most obvious is the fading of memory after so much time has passed. Jadzia (pronounced Yah'jah)—as she was known to family and friends—was 89 years old when I began interviewing her but she still had remarkable recall of her past life. However, there were many instances when she remembered just enough to tantalize me, but the details were gone. Jadzia would get frustrated at my insistence that she try harder to remember. It was also challenging to find historical information that explained or clarified what she told me. These searches led me in so many interesting directions and to valuable sources that allowed me to enrich the story with historical context. Our discussions reopened old wounds and brought back memories that my mother had buried for decades. I struggled with the ethics of this unfolding process and with my obligations as daughter, researcher, and writer. My mother was initially ambivalent about the project and questioned its relevance: "This is old history and so much has already been written about this," Jadzia would say. But eventually, she accepted the value and importance of her story and became very supportive. She would even chide me if I was working on something other than the book.

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How is the book structured?

A

The book chronologically follows my mother's life. The first part focuses on Jadzia's childhood, her medical training, and the early years of her medical practice during the Nazi occupation of her home city of Łódź'. The middle section presents her experiences as a prisoner of the vast Nazi camp system. The third part examines "surviving survival,"—the aftermath of such tragic violence—detailing her work as a refugee doctor in Germany and later her struggles as an immigrant in the United States. How does someone put the shattered pieces of their life back together out of the chaos and loss of such an experience? This is a fascinating question for me as daughter and as anthropologist. It gets at the core of what it means to be human—it touches on our capacity for adaptation, resilience, and hope; on cooperation as well as competition for resources and opportunities;

and on the range of human emotions, from anger, grief, and despair, to relief, compassion, and love. The book is structured around Jadzia's voice, using quotes from interviews. But it also incorporates my own journey of rediscovering my family's past, while interweaving this personal and family narrative with 20th century history. Medicine was a defining theme in my mother's life and it is an important theme in this book. Medicine shaped her identity and saved her life. The loss of her profession—her inability to practice medicine in the United States—was something my mother regretted to the day she died at the age of one hundred.

Q Who is the audience for this story?

A I wanted this book to be accessible to a broad audience—including people that my mother encountered in her daily life. The topics that are covered provide many issues that could be discussed by a book group or in a classroom. My mother's story includes the broader historical context and raises issues concerning Polish history, World War II and the Holocaust, Nazi slave labor, and the struggles of refugees and immigrants. I hope that my fellow anthropologists and other scholars of memoir and biography, history, Holocaust and Jewish studies, ethnic and immigrant studies, and women's studies will also find this story of interest.