

Intimate Ethnography and Holocaust Survivors:

By Ellen Cassedy, www.ellencassedy.com



As the years pass, our opportunity to gather information about the Holocaust directly from those who lived through it is, sadly, becoming increasingly rare – and for that reason, increasingly urgent.

Interviewing our own family members is a special case – one that brings with it special challenges and special rewards.

As a daughter and as an anthropologist, Barbara Rylko-Bauer believed her mother, a Holocaust survivor, had an important story to tell – one that would shed light on an era through the lens of one woman's experience. But when

she began interviewing her mother about her experiences, she encountered the same phrases over and over:

“I can’t remember.”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s personal.”

Rylko-Bauer and her colleague Alisse Waterston coined the term “intimate ethnography” to describe writing and research projects that “embed deeply personal family narratives in broader frames.”

The two anthropologists recognize that obtaining sensitive information from beloved family members can involve unique difficulties. Yet they posit that the personal ties between the writer and her subject can also enrich a writing project like nothing else.

Because her mother wasn’t eager to talk, Rylko-Bauer decided to stop asking questions and take it slow. She and her mother sat at the kitchen table and looked through a box of old family photos. Meanwhile, the tape recorder was rolling.

Barbara proceeded with sensitivity and patience. Over many hours, she ventured again into sensitive territory. The two of them circled back over the same topics multiple times.

As the searing story of her mother’s painful experiences spooled out, old wounds opened. Her mother began to have trouble sleeping. Once again, for a time, Barbara suspended the interviews.

But she kept coming back. After years of persistence, she published her extraordinary book, *A Polish Doctor in the Nazi Camps: My Mother's Memories of Imprisonment, Immigration, and a Life Remade*.

Alisse Waterston's book, *My Father's Wars*, entailed hours upon hours of interviews with her father, with whom she had a complex and fiery relationship. The friction between the two of them suffuses Waterston's account of the impact of war on an ordinary individual, adding a special power to a compelling piece of historical writing.

My own book, *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust*, began to take shape one day when my elderly uncle, a Holocaust survivor, took me aside one day and revealed a hidden truth from his time in a Lithuanian ghetto.

After some 60 years of silence, as my uncle and I tiptoed into a new terrain, my uncle's discomfort was written all over his face. That face was very dear to me. I respected him and didn't want to hurt him or invade his privacy. I knew I would need to proceed with care and compassion.

That relationship with Holocaust survivors – an intimate familial relationship – is something precious that we won't have with us for many years longer. It can add an irreplaceable dimension to our historiography.

In my case, as my uncle revealed his story, I began to look inside myself, examining how I felt about this new information. My own feelings of resistance, shame, fear, loyalty, and love led me to discover the core of my writing project. I began to understand – from the inside – what is involved when an individual – or a nation – undertakes to confront the past.

This led me to explore how Lithuania, my uncle's birthplace, is – and is not – engaging with its Holocaust past. I began to reach across cultural divides and ask whether we can honor our diverse heritages without perpetuating the fears and hatreds of the past. That wider story became the true subject of my book.

My family ties with my uncle touched my heart and unlocked my mind. Just as happened to Barbara Rylko-Bauer and Alisse Waterston, “intimate ethnography” reaped its own unique rewards.

Ellen Cassedy is the author of [*We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust*](#) (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012). Visit her website at www.ellencassedy.com.