

A POLISH DOCTOR IN THE NAZI CAMPS: CREATIVE NONFICTION, INTIMATE ETHNOGRAPHY, AND ETHNICITY

THOMAS J. NAPIERKOWSKI

University of Colorado – Colorado Springs

No study of national identity, race, or ethnicity is complete without a consideration of the literature penned by members of the group in question (descent literature) and of the treatment and image of the group in literature penned by outsiders. This essay examines a recently published book for the light it throws on the Polish experience of World War II, on the plight of Poles displaced after the War, on the immigrant experience, on Polish American ethnicity, and, perhaps even more significantly, for the opportunities of genre which it suggests for future scholarship and creative work on all these topics. The book to which I refer is *A Polish Doctor in the Nazi Camps* by Barbara Rylko-Bauer.

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No study of national identity, race, or ethnicity is complete without a consideration of the literature penned by members of the group in question (descent literature) and of the treatment and image of the group in literature penned by outsiders. As I have argued elsewhere, “Even when the literature is poorly written or biased, it still provides valuable insights into its authors and its audience. As historian Richard Wunderli has noted, literature—like government documents, economic statistics, ship manifestos, private and official correspondence, and a myriad of others sources—and better than most—is crucial to the proper analysis of a phenomenon, an era, a community.”¹ There is, in

¹ T.J. Napierkowski, ‘Polish American Literature: A Story of Exile, Emigration, and Adaptation,’ in A. Mazurkiewicz, ed, *East Central Europe in Exile*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Vol. 2 (2013), p. 3.

any case, no doubt in my mind that this is certainly as true for the study of American ethnicity and East European immigration as it has been for the study of African American identity and culture.

This essay will examine a recently published book for the light it throws on the Polish experience of World War II, on the plight of Poles displaced after the War, on the immigrant experience, on Polish American ethnicity, and, perhaps even more significantly, for the opportunities of genre which it suggests for future scholarship and creative work on all these topics. The book to which I refer is *A Polish Doctor in the Nazi Camps* by Barbara Rylko-Bauer. The value of the book and the opportunities to which it points are demonstrated in a casual comment by the author more than half way through the text: “My parents did not hide ... [their] history from me, yet I do not recall much talk about their experiences in any depth—just individual anecdotes that I overheard as I sat at the dinner table. *I knew—but I didn't really know*” [emphasis added].² This condition of knowing—but not really knowing—is a state which literature in general and, more recently, creative nonfiction and intimate ethnography address and, when well written, remedy.

The publishers of *A Polish Doctor in the Nazi Camps* provide a good summary of the leading character of the book, of the author, of her methodological approach, and of the significance of the work:

Jadwiga Lenartowicz Rylko, known as Jadzia (Yah'-jah), was a young Polish Catholic physician in Lodz at the start of World War II. Suspected of resistance activities, she was arrested in January 1944. For the next fifteen months, she endured three Nazi concentration camps and a forty-two-day death march, spending part of this time working as a prison-doctor to Jewish slave laborers. *A Polish Doctor in the Nazi Camps* follows Jadzia from her childhood and medical training, through her wartime experiences, to her struggles to create a new life in the postwar world.

Jadzia's daughter, anthropologist Barbara Rylko-Bauer, constructs an intimate ethnography that weaves a personal family narrative against a twentieth-century historical backdrop. As Rylko-Bauer travels back in time with her mother, we learn of the particular hardships that female concentration camp prisoners faced. The struggle continued after the war as Jadzia attempted to rebuild her life, first as a refugee doctor in Germany and later as an immigrant in the United States. Like many postwar immigrants, Jadzia had high hopes of making new connections and continuing her career. Unable to surmount personal, economic,

² B. Rylko-Bauer, *A Polish Doctor in the Nazi Death Camps: My Mother's Memories of Imprisonment, Immigration, and a Life Remade*, Norman 2013, p. 199.

and social obstacles to medical licensure, however, she had to settle for work as a nurse's aide.

As a contribution to accounts of wartime experiences, Jadzia's story stands out for its sensitivity to the complexities of the Polish memory of war. Built upon both historical research and conversations between mother and daughter, the story combines Jadzia's voice and Rylko-Bauer's own journey of rediscovering her family's past. The result is a powerful narrative about struggle, survival, displacement, and memory, augmenting our understanding of a horrific period in human history and the struggle of Polish immigrants in its aftermath.³

The author, her methodology, and the foci of *A Polish Doctor in the Nazi Camps* are reinforced by the very structure of the work: a Prologue which dramatically introduces her mother Jadzia and which explains the nature and methodology of intimate ethnography; Part I: "A Young Doctor in Occupied Lodz"; Part II: "In the Camps"; and Part III: "Surviving Survival." Furthermore, although parts of the book—Jadzia's wartime and immediate postwar experiences—might seem to stray from the topic of "American ethnicity," they play an important role in Jadzia's identity as a displaced person, an immigrant, and eventually as an ethnic Polish American and, one might add, in her daughter's identity as well.

Rylko-Bauer goes to some length to explain her methodology and "intimate ethnography." Early on she notes: "The anthropologist uses personal family material—embedded in specific historical and social contexts—to understand traumatic history and situate memories and experiences within larger social forces such as wars, exile, and displacement."⁴ In her case, she explains that in addition "to documenting her mother's life," she used her mother's story "to explore larger social issues and academic topics: the political economy of Nazi slave labor; the use and abuse of medicine in the camps; resilience and survival; the complexities of Polish Christian and Polish Jewish understandings of the past; the paradoxes of the U.S. immigrant experience; and the relationship of memory to history."⁵ She admits that "This approach also crosscuts the traditional anthropological genres of life history and historical ethnography"⁶ and elsewhere acknowledges that there are pitfalls associated with such an approach: "The challenge is ... to chronicle our parents' rich and complex lives while also understanding and accounting for the methodological, emotional, and

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

ethical issues attendant to intimate and life histories and finding ways of linking the individual stories to larger social processes.”⁷ Despite the “epistemological, emotional, methodological, and ethical issues” involved, Rylko-Bauer insists that situating a parent’s story in larger “cultural, historical, and social” contexts is personally, intellectually, and academically worth the effort and risk.

Intimate ethnography is as much a topic of this essay as Rylko-Bauer’s book itself, and I will return to this new genre shortly; but an exploration of the effectiveness of this approach in *A Polish Doctor in the Nazi Camps* demands attention first.

Barbara Rylko-Bauer faced two fundamental challenges in writing this book: one was “to find an effective way of harnessing the power of her [Jadzia’s, her mother’s] story,”⁸ and the other was to place that story “in its historical context—the Nazi occupation of Poland, Hitler’s exploitation of millions of prisoners as slave laborers, the uncertainty and chaos of postwar Germany, and the challenges of immigrant life in the United States”⁹—and the subtopics needed to fill out each of these contexts.

Of the first challenge Rylko-Bauer comments:

My mother tended not to be very analytical or reflective when telling me about her life, and her accounts were often fragmentary. Various versions of anecdotes might contain different bits and pieces, but they matched in detail. To structure this book around my mother’s voice, I pulled these versions together into a coherent narrative, and as a result many of the quotations from our interviews and conversations are actually composites of various retellings of a particular event. The words are my mother’s; she just didn’t say them all at one time.¹⁰

The difficulty of this first challenge was nicely summarized by her mother: “Unless you go through these kinds of experiences yourself, you can listen, but you have no idea what it was like. You can’t even imagine.”¹¹

Rylko-Bauer’s success on the level of the personal narrative will stand or fall with individual readers on the basis of their backgrounds and familiarity with the War and Nazi atrocities; but readers are certainly brought into Jadzia’s world. Two moments from different periods in Jadzia’s life illustrate the point.

⁷ A. Waterston, B. Rylko-Bauer, ‘Out of the shadows of history and memory: Personal family narratives in ethnographies or rediscovery,’ *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2006), p. 405.

⁸ B. Rylko-Bauer, *A Polish Doctor...*, p. 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

The first describes her induction into the Ravensbruck Concentration Camp:

“In the morning, it all began. We were ordered to undress, leave all belongings behind, and we took a shower with a tiny bit of soap, just enough to wash yourself. And then we walked naked into another room, where they were doing examinations. You were examined everywhere, to make sure that you weren’t hiding gold or valuables on your body. They looked into your mouth, your vagina, even in your rectum. Can you imagine? Each of us had to go naked, one by one. The exams were done by German women prisoners assigned to this work, but under SS supervision. They checked us out and, when ordered, would cut off your hair with clippers.

“Not everyone had their hair cut off. I must have been singled out for punishment. My sister Zosia used to remark on how beautiful my hair was—dark blond, thick, but soft and naturally wavy. When this German woman started on my hair with clippers, I thought I would simply go crazy. She clipped my entire head, to the scalp.

“You know, this was the worst part for me, losing my hair. It was so degrading. I felt like I could just strike out, kick someone—but of course I didn’t.”

My mother paused to calm herself down. Her face was flushed, her eyes bright with tears. Sharing this ordeal with me was clearly difficult for her. I offered to stop, but she wanted to continue ...¹²

The other incident came late in Jadzia’s life when she discussed her disappointment at not being allowed to practice medicine in the United States:

Fighting back tears, my mother tried to explain to me why things did not work out: “It wasn’t my fault, you know. It was just fate. I had every intention of practicing in America, and your father supported this. But I just couldn’t, because of circumstances—you were still a young child, we didn’t have much money, and we had no family here that we could rely on to help us. Your father was never certain how long his job would last, and he was getting older. A lot of the immigrants that came over when we did faced similar situations. It just didn’t work out for me.”¹³

Such moments certainly do insert a personal dimension into the bigger picture of history which Rylko-Bauer goes to great pains to include; and this big picture is as vital to the goal of the book as the private life—indeed, in many ways, especially important to Americans readers.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 309–310.

The truth is that most Americans are virtually ignorant of Polish history, shockingly unfamiliar with a sophisticated knowledge of World War II, surprisingly indifferent to the immigrant experience, and uninterested in the Polish American ethnic experience; and this ignorance makes credible in the eyes of many the most inaccurate and outrageous possibilities with regard to these topics. For this very reason the history which Rylko-Bauer weaves into her mother's story is as important as the experiences of a single individual. This is nicely illustrated by a comment she makes early in the book. As she herself became more aware of her mother's experiences, she reports, "I would tell them [friends] about my mother, who had been imprisoned in three different German concentration camps. 'But you're Catholic, not Jewish, right?' they would ask. 'So why would your mom be in a concentration camp?' People still ask me this question today."¹⁴ Among the many topics about which readers of *A Polish Doctor in the Nazi Camps* will be enlightened are the Soviet invasion of Poland on September 17, 1939; the Katyn Forest massacre; Operation Tannenberg and the Nazi plan for Poles; the *Armia Krajowa* and its contributions to the war effort; the kidnapping and Germanization of as many as two hundred thousand Polish children; Soviet attitudes toward Russian prisoners of war and Polish displaced persons; the repatriation of Poles; the Allied "betrayal" of Poland at Yalta; and American concerns about the resettlement of displaced persons in the United States. Many of these topics are treated only passingly in the book; but the mere mention of them will enlighten many American readers and alter at least some misconceptions about World War II, the Polish experience in the War, and Polish American ethnicity. That conceded, Rylko-Bauer's handling of some of these topics and others are sometimes far too superficial. Her reports, for example, on the pre-war Polish political scene, on the military campaign of resistance to the Nazi invasion of September 1939, on the long history of Polish-Jewish relations, on the Polish contributions to Allied war effort in Europe, and even on American Polonia seem particularly brief and inadequate.

In a similar vein, *A Polish Doctor in the Nazi Camps*, at both the personal and historical level, neglects a point which Rylko-Bauer identifies as a distinguishing feature of her mother's story: her Catholic identity. Most curious, for example, is the fact that there is really only one mention of religious faith in the chronicle of Jadzia's camp experiences and death march. During one of the reported interviews, Rylko-Bauer describes the following scene:

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

She [Jadzia] paused for a moment. “You know, Basiu, this was not war. These were inhuman and inhumane actions. This was not war. This was murder!” Moments like these afforded me a rare glimpse of the outrage my mother felt but rarely expressed regarding what she and others had suffered at the hands of the Nazis. Whenever she thought back on this close call and others she had during the war, she always remarked, “Some force was looking over me.” And then she often added, “My mother prayed for me constantly.”¹⁵

More glimpses into whatever role Jadzia’s faith life played (or didn’t play) in her experiences both during and after the war would have enhanced the book’s insights into the Polish Catholic experience of the War and into the Polish American ethnic identity. Did Jadzia, for example, decline to terminate a pregnancy on moral principle or simply because of a lack of means? What was the Nazi attitude toward Catholic and other Christian prisoners? And what was the relationship between Jewish and Catholic/Christian inmates?

Finally, before a clear estimate of the implications of intimate ethnography for the ethnic experience in America and for ethnic literature is possible, a closer consideration of the family’s experience as immigrants and ethnics is appropriate. Indeed, Rylko-Bauer acknowledges that it was really only in the course of interviewing her mother and researching her book that she realized the adjustments which were required of her mother and father: “I never recognized, while growing up in Detroit, how much uncertainty my parents faced. They kept their troubles hidden from me and did their best, within their means, to make my childhood safe and comfortable.”¹⁶ This realization is itself a keen insight into the immigrant and ethnic experiences: the gap in circumstances and awareness that often separates the immigrants from their children, between the first and second generation of the immigrant family—a gap which can produce great pain and misunderstanding in immigrant families.

In broad terms the difficulties which Jadzia and her husband faced in establishing a new life in America can be discussed as an effort to negotiate their new status as not just immigrants but as displaced persons and political exiles and to clarify their relationship with their new country and with the established Polish American community with which they shared much in common but which had a different social and political agenda.

Here again, as with her efforts to capture her mother’s experiences during the war, Rylko-Bauer produces a personal narrative which provides positive

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

examples of the issues addressed. One of the most powerful examples comes from the letters of Rylko-Bauer's father to family in Poland:

“For the first time I am grappling with the fact that I am old (even though I feel young). But here [in the United States] you can't afford to be old. Suddenly, I am facing this stark reality. And so far, I have not been able to reconcile myself to this fact—nor dare I, for I have a daughter who is 9 years old. We are alone here and must rely on ourselves. Jadzia works hard, but her earnings only cover about 1/3 of our modest home budget.”¹⁷

In another letter much a similar message is conveyed:

“What I want more than anything is time. I've been here six years and each day get up at 5:30 and go to sleep at 10:30, sometimes later. Even though I struggle to keep my eyes open at work, I can't remember when last I took a nap after supper. ... As soon as one returns from work, there is so much to do at home. ... This lack of time means everything is done in a hurry in America: you eat dinner quickly, sleep quickly, love quickly, and just glance at the newspaper headlines. This lack of time makes life here seem so superficial, oversimplified, without much depth. Life is difficult. Everyone is focused on himself. No one is willing to help another. Woe if you get sick, which is why Jadzia and I do everything to stay well. Most important, however, is to retain your sense of self and not get lost. ... America demands youth and strength. My age here is a huge disadvantage; it's unacceptable. Thus, you can only imagine how hard I work not to be left behind. This takes so much effort. America has everything, and yet most people live in debt. It takes hard work to have even the basics of a good life, meaning food and housing; there is so much more here, but most people have neither the time nor the money to enjoy it.”¹⁸

Whether one agrees with such an assessment or not, there is no doubt about its sincerity. For Jadzia's part, Rylko-Bauer reports, the most painful adjustment to American life was the inability to practice medicine: “My mother never lost her identity as physician. She repeatedly told me that the loss of her profession was harder for her to bear than the imprisonment and suffering she endured during the war. It was a loss she regretted for the rest of her life.”¹⁹ In the final analysis, Rylko-Bauer concludes that her mother never truly made the adjustment: “Her apparently successful assimilation was only superficial, and she would comment

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 298–99.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

on facets of American culture that she never got used to: the informality, the casual familiarity of social relationships, the fast pace of life, the overreliance on credit. She had a deep appreciation for the freedoms she enjoyed and no illusion about returning to Poland, but she never quite felt she belonged.”²⁰

One other feature of the Polish immigrant and ethnic experience that deserves comment is Rylko-Bauer’s reference to Saturday schools, a feature of Polish American life which deserves closer scholarly attention:

During the week I attended the nearby public school and played with kids in my neighborhood, but on Saturdays my father drove me to St. Andrew Church for classes in Polish language, Polish history, and Polish cultural achievements, taught by immigrants who had been professional teachers in Poland before the war. We learned of heroic events in Poland’s past and about the great composers, painters, writers and scientists who were never mentioned in my public school textbooks: Paderewski, Wyspianski, Mickiewicz and Maria Sklodowska-Curie. I belonged to the Polish scouts, went to Polish summer camp, and took Polish folk dance lessons—I even had my own Polish folk costume.²¹

These are features of Polish American life with which generations of immigrant and ethnic children are familiar and which deserve better study and understanding.

Whatever one’s response to Rylko-Bauer’s various analyses, there is no doubt that *A Polish Doctor in the Nazi Camps* is a major contribution to a better appreciation of Polish American ethnicity, of East European immigration to the United States, and, at least in America, of World War II; but there is another way in which the book contributes to these fields: it breaks new ground with the genre of intimate ethnography and demonstrates how this genre can serve these subject areas. Thus, I conclude with a brief exploration of the relationship between intimate ethnography and another relatively new genre, creative nonfiction, and with the suggestion that both genres deserve closer scrutiny.

In one sense, intimate ethnography and creative nonfiction are different sides of the same coin; both genres are narrative writing “embedded in its historical context.”²² I have already summarized Rylko-Bauer’s view of the advantages and pitfalls of intimate ethnography; a brief overview of creative nonfiction will point out the many similarities between the genres. Like intimate ethnography, creative nonfiction is a relatively new genre which has received as yet little critical attention and which at the moment is marked by a lack of established

²⁰ Ibid., p. 322.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 313–14.

²² Ibid., p. 17.

boundaries. There is not even a universally accepted definition of the genre, but a serviceable and somewhat popular definition might be “a factually accurate narrative written with attention to literary style and technique”; it is also writing which is generally evaluated by the same criteria applied to fiction and even to poetry. Literary critic Barbara Lounsberry, author of *The Art of Fact*, identifies four “constitutive characteristics of the genre”: a documentable subject matter, exhaustive research, a focus on the scene (a revived context for the events), and fine writing. Furthermore, creative nonfiction, like intimate ethnography, is bound by a strict ethical demand to be factually and historically accurate.

In any case, both genres insist on research, creativity, and fine writing. Rylko-Bauer, for example, admits to “reconstructing” many of the unrecorded conversations she had with her mother; and she actually introduces *A Polish Doctor in the Nazi Camps* with a piece of creative nonfiction: “From what my mother told me about the early hours of January 13, 1944, [the day of Jadzia’s arrest] this is how I imagine what she must have thought and felt in the moment her life changed forever”;²³

It had been a very busy day, so many patients to see, and I had a lot on my mind. Even though I was exhausted, I couldn’t fall asleep. I kept thinking about the events of recent weeks and every once in a while would turn on the light to glance at my watch. Sometime after midnight, I finally drifted off.

In what seemed a few minutes later, I was abruptly awakened by loud knocking and shouts outside my door. I sat up, heart racing, unable for a moment to move or think.

More shouts.

More pounding.

In the middle of the night, this could only mean trouble.

I hurriedly got out of bed, threw on my robe, and rushed to the door. As I reached for the knob, I paused. I had been dreading this moment ever since I found out that Witold, a member of our radio listening group, had been arrested. The Nazis had made it a crime for Poles to own or even listen to a radio, but we were so hungry for news about the war that we took risks.

Over the past few weeks, we had been worrying that Witold would break down under Nazi interrogation and tell everything he knew. How many days would go by before the Gestapo, the state secret police, paid each of us a visit.

I had good reason to worry. Since the Germans had occupied my hometown, Lodz, in September 1939, two of my sisters had been arrested, and one of them was languishing in a concentration camp. I was petrified. But if I tried to hide, the Gestapo would punish my parents instead. I couldn’t have that on my conscience.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Bracing myself, I opened the door, determined not to show how frightened I was. Several men armed with revolvers brushed aside my protests as they brusquely entered the apartment. One of them, who spoke Polish, ordered me to get dressed quickly. I shoved my hand into the pockets of my robe to steady them.

“Why are you here? Where are you taking me? What have I done?”

His only response was to order me to be quiet while the other two searched the small apartment that also served as my medical office. When I started to speak again, he cut me off with a warning to ask no more questions, just to get dressed. “There’s sense in protesting, because we know everything. You might as well come along without an argument.”

For a moment, anger overcame my fear, and I demanded that he turn away while I dress. But he refused to let me out of his sight. So I took off my pajamas and put on a slip and dress, stockings, shoes, and then my warm fur-lined coat, a hat, and a pair of gloves. I tried to think of what else I should take ... Toothbrush? Comb? Money? Documents?

I picked up my purse just as the man grabbed my arm. He hustled me out of the apartment and shoved me into the backseat of a dark car. As I sat there waiting, stunned and shaking, I tried to calm myself by thinking, with a bit of chagrin, that at least now I would get a break from seeing patients night and day.

I glanced out the window just as the other two men, done with their rummaging, left the building. I couldn’t imagine what they had expected to find. As we drove off, I glanced back once more at the building where I had worked and lived for three and a half years. I hoped to God I would soon return.²⁴

It is telling and informative of the relationship of the two genres that Rylko-Bauer begins her work of intimate ethnography with a piece of creative nonfiction.

In his Nobel Lecture Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn reminded the world of the importance of literature:

Literature transmits condensed and irrefutable human experience in still another priceless way: from generation to generation. It thus becomes the living memory of a nation. What has faded into history it thus keeps warm and preserves in a form that defies distortion and falsehood. Thus, literature, together with language, preserves and protects a nation’s soul.²⁵

What Solzhenitsyn claims about a nation is also true for immigration and ethnicity; and intimate ethnography and creative nonfiction can help tell the story and preserve the memory. They can help us to know—to really know.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 3–4.

²⁵ A. Solzhenitsyn, *Nobel Lecture*, New York 1972, p. 19.