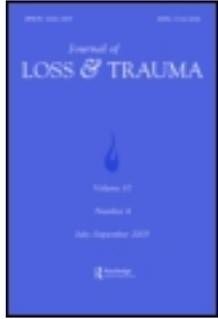


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### More than Mazel? Luck and Agency in Surviving the Holocaust

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## More than Mazel? Luck and Agency in Surviving the Holocaust

Carolyn Ellis, Jerry Rawicki

**Bios:** **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 Auto ethnography*; *Revision: Auto ethnographic Reflections on Life and Work*; and *Music Auto ethnographies: Making Auto ethnography Sing/Making Music Personal*. She has published numerous articles, chapters, and personal stories situated in emotions and interpretive representations of qualitative research, particularly auto ethnography. Her current research focuses on compassionate listening to Holocaust testimonies and sharing authority in a collaborative, relational auto ethnographic 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 a novel, *Sins and Sorrow*, and several essays about his experiences during the Holocaust.

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### Abstract

The canonical explanation for how Jews survived during the Holocaust involves some form of luck. To explore and deepen an understanding of episodic moments of luck, this article presents and discusses survivor Jerry Rawicki's close calls with death during the Holocaust. The first author examines Jerry's perspective as a survivor and her own perspective as a collaborative witness to his stories, as well as how these stories fit

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together within the broader literature about luck and survival. She suggests possible consequences of regarding luck as the sole explanation of survival and contends that agency and luck can go hand in hand even under oppressive structural conditions, such as the Holocaust. She concludes by reflecting on why Jerry and she might understand survival differently and on the importance of considering both positions in compassionate collaborative research.

**KEYWORDS:** Holocaust, Jewish resistance, luck, agency, collaborative witnessing

No one survived the Holocaust per se. They survived ghettos, deportations, and concentrations camps. They hid. They passed on the Aryan side. They resisted ... [and] stayed alive by actively struggling not to die. (Linden, 1993, pp. 86, 102)

“I survived because of luck, pure and simple,” Jerry tells me as we walk to the Florida Holocaust Museum from the Jewish Deli nearby where we have had lunch. A survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, Jerry has been meeting regularly with me at the Museum to talk about his experiences during and after the Holocaust. Usually open to debate and alternative interpretations, Jerry makes this statement as though it is the final word. I wonder what lies beneath that statement, its intended and unintended consequences, and how others have considered the role of luck in survival. I also am intrigued to know more about the details of those moments when death stared Jerry in the face. What does he remember thinking and feeling? Did he manage to escape solely through luck or did other factors come into play?

“Would you be willing to talk through your survival with me?” I ask, recalling his descriptions of close calls.

“Sure,” he says, “but in the end you’ll see that I was just a lucky person.”

I first met Jerry in June 2009, when he agreed to be interviewed for a project I conducted with the University of South Florida Libraries Holocaust and Genocide Studies Center and the Florida Holocaust Museum. For this project, several Ph. D. students and I interviewed forty-five survivors living in the Tampa Bay area. All 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#>). Jerry and I have continued to work together during the three years since that time, recording, writing, and analyzing his stories. We use a process of collaborative witnessing in which we freely exchange ideas, and work back and forth over an extended period to write and explore concrete stories of his experiences during and after the Holocaust (see Ellis and Rawicki, forthcoming, a, b; also Greenspan, 2010; Rubin and Greenspan, 2006).

My goal in this paper is to explore the role of luck and agency in survival during the Holocaust, examining the broader literature about survival and connecting it to Jerry’s stories, his perspective as a survivor, and my perspective as a collaborative witness to his stories. After introducing Jerry, I summarize the stories that he told me and we wrote together, focusing on the perceived role of luck and agency. I present two stories in

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detail, one that emphasizes the role of luck in survival and a second backstory that indicates the ways in which Jerry tried to exercise control over events that were part of how this story played out. After presenting the literature about survival during the Holocaust, I suggest possible consequences of regarding luck as the sole explanation of survival and contend that agency and luck can go hand in hand even under oppressive structural conditions such as the Holocaust. I conclude by reflecting on why Jerry and I might understand survival differently and on the importance of considering both positions in compassionate collaborative research.

## BEGINNING THE CONVERSATION

The next week, Jerry bounds down the steps of the Florida Holocaust Museum as I approach the front entrance. Though I am ten minutes early, Jerry, as usual, is at our meeting place ahead of me.

“Hi, Jerry. How are you?”

“I was afraid I’d be late since my tennis game went on longer than usual,” Jerry says.

I smile at the reason for his perceived lateness. Eighty-three-years old, Jerry is suntanned, healthy, and appears younger than his years. I conjure an image of Jerry as a young fourteen-year-old courier for the Jewish resistance during the war, carrying messages outside of the Warsaw Ghetto where he lived, exchanging money and jewels for food with the non-Jewish Poles, and escorting children out of the Ghetto to be hidden. I imagine Jerry as a youthful risk taker eagerly volunteering for dangerous tasks. I envision

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him moving quickly and alertly from place to place, trusted by underground leaders as a smart, responsible, and quick young man, able to size up situations and make decisions quickly.

“Wish I could play tennis. But with a bad knee, I had to stop long ago,” I say.

“You have to stay active. That’s the key,” Jerry says, “both physically and mentally.” He nods at the big brown satchel of books weighing down his right shoulder.

“That’s a load,” I say.

“It is, but worth the weight. I’ve finished the Frankl book (2006) and I am part way through the Levi one (1989) you recommended,” he says, patting the satchel.

As avid readers, Jerry and I often exchange and discuss books we have read. Also a writer, he has authored a novel, *Sins and Sorrow* (2007c), several stories (Rawicki, 2007a, b), and letters to editors of local newspapers. He also has coauthored scholarly essays and stories (Ellis and Rawicki, forthcoming a, b; Rawicki and Ellis, 2011).

“Both books speak to the topic for today,” I say. “How survivors survived.”

We concentrate on making our way to the conference room, settle in, and I turn on my recorder. “So you think survival was all luck?” I ask.

“Yes, I do, and other survivors agree with me. For example, that’s what Levi (1989) says in *The Drowned and the Saved*.” Jerry pulls the small book from his satchel, thumbs through the pages, and reads a passage he has marked:

‘[Survivors] were subjected...to a condition of pure survival, a daily struggle against hunger, cold, fatigue, and blows in which the room for choices (especially moral choices) was reduced to zero.... In short, they were saved by luck, and there is not much sense in trying to find something common to all their destinies, beyond perhaps their initial good health’ (pp. 49-50).

“What more is there to say?” Jerry concludes.

“I think there may be more. It seems to me that saying they were all ‘saved by luck’, as Levi does, implies something common as well. That interests me less than understanding the factors in how particular people, such as you, survived,” I reply.

“Even there, luck wins out. Frankl’s story is filled with chance events that saved his life,” Jerry says, retrieving *Man’s Search for Meaning* from his satchel. “For example, once Frankl was being beaten to death by a foreman when an air raid alarm went off. Afterwards, he was lucky to be regrouped into another work detail. If the alarm had not gone off just then, he would have died” (2006, p. 57).

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“That’s a good example,” I acknowledge, “though Frankl also stresses the ability to exercise some control over our lives, at least in the moment. No matter the situation, he writes, we always have freedom to choose our attitude and determine our response” (2006, p. 66).

“That may be true, but that doesn’t take away from the fact that you had to be lucky to survive in the camps or ghettos,” says Jerry.

“No doubt luck was important,” I interrupt, “but what do you make of the question implied by Harold Kushner in the foreword of Frankl’s (2006, p. x) book: Given how bad conditions were, how did anyone manage to be lucky enough to survive? The question suggests other factors may have worked together with luck. That is what I’m interested in, not a single generalizable reason for survival. I understand, as Langer (1996, p. 8) writes, that “No simple rules apply” and that any “effort to design them is futile.” Still I think it worthwhile to look at what else, other than luck, might have been present in situations where a survivor managed to live through a close call. Calling on luck as the universal explanation shuts off exploration of the details of survivors’ experiences and limits our understanding of how survival took place.”

“Seems to me luck was everything,” Jerry repeats, without following up on my statement.

“I know in my case I was just a crazy, happy-go-lucky kid. I didn’t know what I was doing half the time. Yet I survived.

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“Look,” Jerry continues, “heaven forbid, you and I could go out and get hit by a car today while another person would live. That’s luck, pure and simple.”

“Yes,” I say, “but if I have good driving skills and I drive carefully, I am less likely to be hit by another car than is someone with no skill who isn’t paying attention.”

“Yes, you would be less likely to cause an accident,” Jerry says thoughtfully.

“And I am more likely to see what is happening and move out of the way,” I reply.

Jerry nods, but doesn’t say anything.

Jerry seems adamant about his position, even while he acknowledges my logic. Given his proclivity to question and deconstruct his premises, turning them over and over to view them from a multitude of directions, I wonder why it is so important—to Jerry and many other survivors—that luck be accepted as the all-encompassing explanation for survival.

“I agree that during the Holocaust luck played a major role in the survival of random violence and vicious perpetrators, who killed, maimed, and destroyed their victims for no reasons, or for illogical reasons they concocted at the moment,” I say into the silence.

“Still I am not satisfied to end it there. I’m suggesting ‘luck plus’ as an explanation rather than ‘only luck’. When I think of the stories you have told me in which you were almost caught by the enemy, I see other factors intersecting pure luck.”

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“Like what?” asks Jerry.

“Like how fast you could run, for one, and how quickly you could size up situations, for another. Another person in the same situations might not have been so lucky; in many cases, they weren’t. Have you ever wondered why you were lucky so often?”

Jerry shakes his head. “It doesn’t feel right to even consider that my survival stemmed from anything other than luck,” Jerry says. “None of us had control over what happened not those who died or those who lived.”

“I’m reminded of a quote often attributed to Thomas Jefferson,” I say. “‘I’m a great believer in luck. The harder I work, the more of it I seem to have.’ And a Roman philosopher is supposed to have said, ‘Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity’.”

Jerry smiles, “I’ve heard basketball coaches say that.” Then more seriously, he adds, “Lots of people worked hard and still died through no fault of their own. I may have had opportunities, but I doubt I was any more prepared than others. I worry that the stories we’re writing will make me look like a hero. I’m not a hero. It’s the ones who died who need to be remembered, not me.”

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Jerry makes it clear that he does not want to assign exceptional skill to his survival or imply a kind of divine intervention or that he was “chosen” in any way. “Still your memories of your experience are important in that they show an ordinary person in the Holocaust and the kinds of things he did to stay alive,” I say, recalling Kushner’s (2006, p. 275) admonition that to do justice to the richness and complexity of the Holocaust we must pay attention to ordinary peoples’ constructions of their lives.

“When you put it that way, then I do see how my stories might make a contribution to what we know about survival in the Holocaust,” acknowledges Jerry.

Why am I trying so hard to expand Jerry’s point of view? I’m committed as a scholar to explore the complexity of survivors’ memories, which include control and resistance as well as luck and powerlessness. Langer (1991, p. 199) says that the videotaped oral histories he watched about the Holocaust showed what it meant to exist *without* agency. That is a theme in the stories I have listened to as well, including some of Jerry’s. But within that context, I also see survivors monitoring their actions, making decisions, coordinating with and helping others, all elements of agency (Berger, 2011, p. 20). I want to advance a more complex understanding of survival during the Holocaust without invalidating the perceptions and memories of survivors. Thus I maintain that luck and agency can go hand in hand and that agency can coexist with oppressive and impossible structural conditions, serving to maximize though not ensure survival (Berger, 1995, p. 16; Giddens, 1986).

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## STORIES OF LUCK AND AGENCY

The memories that Jerry shared with me during the next two years included concrete details of agency within the context of luck. Though perhaps my questions led him in that direction, Jerry also readily—without prompting—described how he coordinated his actions to survive, at the same time he resisted *claiming agency*. The stories he told showed how his youthful mental and physical health and abilities aided his survival. He used his Aryan appearance, knowledge of and ability to speak the Polish language, and understanding of his enemy to hide his Jewish identity. Often he responded quickly to dangerous situations and implemented each move before anyone realized he was Jewish. To survive, he had to read others correctly, and, as he himself described, “be able to smell danger and sense evil.” Additionally, he had to act in a way that others read him in ways he intended.

In one of the stories he tells, a blackmailer sees him leaving the Ghetto. As Jerry tries to pass as a Gentile buying goods on the streets of Warsaw, the blackmailer follows him. Though he can outrun the overweight pursuer, he fears he can’t outrun the crowd that quickly becomes interested in the chase. Thinking quickly, he points ahead and calls out, ‘There’s a Jew running. Get the Jew,’ his motion directing the crowd toward the imaginary Jew running in front of him. Using his youthful physical ability, quickness of mind, and cunning, he escaped the blackmailer.

“I knew nothing would get the attention of the crowd better than yelling the word Jew,” he tells me, showing how he used anti-Semitism against his enemy. “When I was

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followed, even when occasionally I was captured, I often pretended to be anti-Semitic. ‘I’m no dirty Jew’, I told my capturers, ‘and sometimes they would believe me and let me go.’” One time, while taking a young child outside the Ghetto to be hidden in a Polish family, he feared the tram conductor was growing suspicious since the young boy looked Jewish. So he pushed the boy off the tram, exclaiming to the conductor, “I think he was a Jew.” Then he got off at the next stop and ran back to take care of the frightened boy, thus saving the boy and possibly himself.

Jerry often describes reading the crowd and sizing up the situation to figure out a plan of action, what I refer to as “ethnographic sensibilities” and what he calls “being circumspect and pragmatic.” He explains in detail how he decided when and whom to trust and when and whom not to—for example, to spend the night with a prostitute who took care of him when he was stranded and in trouble, or to reveal to a young Polish boy his identity as a Jew—and how to avoid being noticed or being singled out—for example, when he needed to get past the guards at the Ghetto gate and blend into crowds of Gentiles.

Some of his abilities, he says, developed from an acquired sense of danger and from instincts that arose in response to having to live like a hunted animal. For example, he describes escaping through a small hole in the Ghetto wall, hauling himself up on steep roofs, and quickly sensing and evading a German ploy of pretending to send Warsaw survivors to South America.

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Jerry eagerly details how others saved him: the quick actions of his mother and later a shopkeeper when Nazis held a gun to his head, the prostitute who hid him, a Gentile merchant who rescued him from blackmailers, and later a boy who hid him in his cellar.

While Jerry admits to the importance of his abilities, instincts, and the help of others in getting him out of jams, he is quick to say that, for the most part, he acted out of fear, and just hoped to stay alive “another moment, hour, or day.” He cautions against seeing his actions as intentional and planned. “Remember I was just a young boy,” he says, “who didn’t think a lot about any plan. Much of the time what I did seemed to be the only choice I had at that moment.” He concludes that he survived because of luck, and he associates anything remotely agentic with luck: luck that he had the characteristics and abilities he had, luck that he was at the right place at the right time, and luck that others happened to be where they were and available and willing to help him when he needed it.

Jerry tells a convincing story of luck in the following episode.

## ***Late For The Gate***

*It all starts one day in the early winter of 1942. My father and I are waiting to cross the main street in the Ghetto when suddenly he waves as someone in a horse-drawn carriage.*

*‘Who was that?’ I ask. ‘A man I worked with before the war,’ Father replies. ‘He is in charge of a group that works outside the Ghetto.’*

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*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 returning work group. Now I am in trouble because the only way to get through the gate into the Ghetto is with a working group. I decide to take my chances at another Ghetto gate that often is easier to get in and out of than this one.*

*It is evening and the temperature has dropped below freezing. As I wait for my opportunity, I fear I'll go to sleep and freeze to death. But 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. Through the blur of falling snowflakes, I see formations of workers line up to enter the Ghetto. Suddenly I dart toward one group and drop in formation to march with them.*

*The people in the group realize that I do not belong to their outfit and that they will be in trouble, possibly killed, if the number of people going back in does not match the number of people that left in that group that morning. They yell and kick at me and try to push me away. 'Get him out! He's a danger!'*

*The man elected by the group to speak on its behalf whenever there is trouble 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!' '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, 'I'm Jerzy Rawicki.' Nothing more. I don't know what makes*

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*me say my name. 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?'*

*'I'm from Plock,' he continues, as I nod. 'I used to work with your father.'*

“This is the man in the hansom cab that my father waved to,” Jerry says to me. “How do you explain my saying my name and nothing else, and that the spokesman of the group just happened to be the man my father knew? The only explanation is luck.”

I find Jerry's explanation convincing, yet I also view what happened in the context of all the events that led to this particular situation, detailed in this story of how Jerry got out of the Ghetto and blended into the Gentile section of Warsaw in the first place.

*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. '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.*

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*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. 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 locals 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, 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 and mingle with the bartering crowd. The separation is now complete. I have transitioned from my role of a Jew bartering with the Gentiles into a Gentile bartering with Jews.*

*As I move through the crowd that surrounds us, 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, walking slowly and calmly, trying not to appear frightened. 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 and turn me in to the Germans.*

Thus to get to the moment he describes in the first story as luck, he has had to blend into the Polish crowds and exchange his items for food without getting caught, hide his armband, and be ready to change his “plan” on a moment’s notice. He must know the best gate to use to try to re-enter the Ghetto and recognize that the gate is not playing. Thus, he must be cautious, then make the risky decision to join a group to reenter the Ghetto, because he feels he has no other choice and will freeze if he stays outside alone. Then he has to be persistent about staying in the group even when many try to push him out.

## **JEWES AND SURVIVAL: WHY MAZEL?**

Thinking about how much agency Jerry demonstrated in his stories and wanting to understand his insistence on luck as an overarching explanation of endurance led me to examine the literature about luck and survival during the Holocaust. There I found that Jerry’s explanation fits with the canonical response of survivors, which involves some form of luck, chance, fate, coincidence, or good fortune: survivors were simply luckier than those who died. While survivors tell harrowing tales of survival in testimonies and memoirs, they often attribute their survival to luck, a result of coincidence and chance happenings that permitted them to narrowly escape danger and certain death (Berger, 2011, p. 16; Prot, 2012, p. 175). Primo Levi (1989, p. 50) is worth repeating here: “In short, they [survivors] were saved by luck, and there is not much sense in trying to find something common to all their destinies, beyond perhaps their initial good health.” Pierre Berg, a survivor of Auschwitz and Dora, also attributes his survival solely to luck.

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“As far as I'm concerned,” writes Berg (2008, p. xi) “[my survival] was all shithouse luck, which is to say—inelegantly—that I kept landing on the right side of the randomness of life” (see also Gilbert, 1998).

Luck also is a prevalent explanation in the analysis of testimonies by researchers (see historians, such as Dwork, 1994; psychologists and psychiatrists, such as Suedfeld, 2003; Eitinger, 1964; and Matussek, 1975; social workers, such as Goldenberg, 2003; journalists and Rabbis, such as Tammeus and Cukierkorn, 2009). “There is no evidence to indicate that survival was due to anything more—or less—than luck and fortuitous circumstances,” writes Dwork (1994, p. 93). Tammeus and Cukierkorn (2009, p. 2) reiterate, “Survival turned out to be much more a matter of chance than anything else. Any choices Jews might make to try to survive were, in the end, not choices at all but, rather, hopeful guesses that their decisions would make a difference.”

The prevalence of luck as an explanation for survival comes as little surprise since those who survived the vicious and random violence of the perpetrators indeed had to have a great deal of good fortune. Moreover, luck serves as a moral explanation since it negates the idea that survivors were in any way superior to or more skillful than those who died in the Holocaust (see Dwork, 1994; Goldenberg, 2003, pp. 539, 542). As such, this explanation provides a form of “narrative humbling”—“a humbling before the dead,” writes Schiff (1997, p. 86).

Dwork (1994) explains:

The notion that longevity was due to some ‘survival strategy’ or a special ‘will to live’ is not only nonsense but a pernicious construct. The logical conclusion of such a supposition is to blame the victims in a subtle but vicious way. It suggests failure or stupidity on the part of those murdered...[T]he daily lives of those whose existence ultimately would be extinguished and those who would have the good luck to survive were the same (p. 93).

By interrogating luck as a totalizing explanation, I do not want to downplay its role in survival nor judge or evaluate people or actions, as Langer (1991 p. 183) warns against. I am not implying that survivors were in any way superior to those who died, or that there was anything those who died could have, or should have, done differently. At the same time, I do want to consider some of the factors that may have intersected with luck in specific cases of survival, an endeavor that does not “divert attention from the enormity of the crimes committed against the victims,” as Dwork (1994, p. 93) claims.

We know a great deal about how people died in the Holocaust. We know less about how they survived. As psychoanalyst Bluhm (1948) says, “Death in a Nazi concentration camp [and ghetto] requires no explanation. Survival does.” (p. 3). To be fearful to unpack “luck” and look at the intersections of agentic and non-agentic factors means we ignore a part of the story about what Jews and others did to survive, including acts of kindness, altruism, and organization (Shostak, 2011, 2012). The reluctance of most advocates, historians, and survivors to raise doubts about luck as a totalizing explanation

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fits with approaches that assume the Holocaust is mystical, unexplainable, unspeakable, and beyond human reason (Franklin, 2010, p. 4; see also Kisantal, 2009, p. 19).

Primo Levi goes even farther and assures that the “best” did not survive the camps. “Preferably,” he writes, “the worst survived, the selfish, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators of the ‘grey zone,’ the spies... The worst survived, that is, the fittest; the best all died” (p. 82). This explanation was popular after the war, with some viewing those in Displaced Person Camps as powerless exiles and the “remnants” of European Jewry (Segev, 1993, as cited in Schiff, 2005, p. 193). Though reactions to survivors have grown more positive, the fear of not having done more to save others or, worse, having harmed others—or being perceived that way—provides other reasons that survivors might embrace luck as an explanation for their continued existence (Goldenberg, 2003, p. 539; Schiff, 1997, p. 87). We survived because of luck, they say, not because of anything we did or didn’t do. As such, this might be a defense against any kind of survivor guilt that one might feel.

Survivors also may not want to reveal what they had to do to survive. Levi (1989) writes that those who survived stole from enemies and a few “had fallen so low as to steal bread from their own companions” (p. 75). This passage suggests that there may have been both a moral and instrumental difference between non-survivors and at least some survivors, who were willing to go to greater lengths to survive. Perhaps the acceptance, without question, of luck as the reason for survival then provides a way not to condemn or judge those who survived as well as a way not to judge or condemn those who died.

## JEWES AND SURVIVAL: MORE THAN MAZEL?

Exploring the “how” of survival in the Holocaust is a quest that in general has not received much attention (Goldenberg, 2003; Suedfeld, 2003; Tammes, 2007). Though infrequent, some researchers have speculated about factors that might have contributed, along with luck, to survival in the Holocaust. For example, while citing the importance of luck, Hilberg (1993, p. 188) argues that “survival was not altogether random” and Suedfeld (2003) concludes that survivors’ “fate was to a great extent influenced by forces outside their own control, but ... within degrees of freedom available to them, did exercise their own abilities and qualities to make survival more probable” (p. 139). Some of these factors included cultural and contextual conditions, communal and organizational resources, as well as social, personal, and psychological characteristics.

Macro forces—such as cultural, national, regional, and local conditions—affected peoples’ chances of survival. For example, research on survival in The Netherlands (Croes, 2006), though somewhat contradictory, looks to the roles of German perpetrators, the power of the Dutch bureaucracy, geography, and demographic characteristics of the Dutch population (Blom, 1989) to try to explain why so few Jews survived in the Netherlands. Others venture that in some geographical locations, Jews were more likely to be able to hide and delay deportation (Moore, 1997). Croes (2006) speculates that municipal level factors related to survival included the percentage of local policemen who were pro-German, the percentage of Catholics in the area, percentage of converted Jews, extent of polarization, and the date of the start of local deportations. Other factors

included how ferociously perpetrators hunted Jews in hiding (Croes, 2006) and how likely it was that Jews had relationships with non-Jews, could go into hiding, or obtain protected status (Tammes, 2007).

Jews had different experiences in the Holocaust depending on the context, i.e. the time period, country in which they lived, and whether they were held in a concentration camp or a ghetto, in hiding, or passing as non-Jews. For example, ninety percent of the Jewish population were killed in Poland and Germany, while twenty percent were killed in Italy (Dawidowicz, 1986, p. 403). Most historians estimate that between 5.1 and 6 million Jews died during the Holocaust (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). Hilberg (2003, p. 1320) conservatively estimates that of the 5.1 million Jews who died, over 800,000 died from "ghettoization and general privation"; 1,400,000 were killed in "open-air shootings"; and up to 2,900,000 perished in camps. In 1944, as many as ten thousand people were killed in the Auschwitz-Birkenau gas chambers every day (Berenbaum, 1993, p. 144).

Beyond these factors, some researchers have explored the importance of local community and organization for survival. Barbara Engelking (2001, p. 27, as quoted in Alpert, 2010, p. 27) concludes that while "the Poles undoubtedly experienced a sense of community and brotherhood" during the war, "for Jews, the war was not—generally—a time when they experienced a positive sense of community. Jewish society during the war became unbelievably atomized, fragmented into individual or individual families, who were concentrated on one, individual goal: to survive." Alpert (2010, p. 27) argues that

assistance, if it came at all, was often in the form of fitting into “informal communities,” such as ethnic, friendship, and work groups that were formed in the camps and resistance and family groups in the ghettos. Here information necessary for survival—such as the underground economy and rules for trade and survival ideology of living in the moment—was disseminated (see also Berger, 1995, 2011, p. 21; see, for example, memoirs that reveal the importance of informal communities, learning rules, and support from others for survival, such as Levi, 1993; Des Pres, 1976; Pawelcynska, 1979; Steinberg, 2001).

Personal and social characteristics of the survivors, brought from their pre-war experience or gained during the war, also contributed to the possibility of survival (Berger, 1995, p. 21; Hilberg, 1992, pp. 159, 188). Though researchers do not always agree on categories, these characteristics often are separated into internal and external and into agentic and non-agentic categories (Suedfeld, 2003; Goldenberg, 2003). In general, appearance, age, and gender are considered external and non-agentic, and attributes such as determination, intelligence, good health, skill, knowledge, and facility with languages are viewed as internal and agentic (Goldenberg, 2003, p. 537; see also Schiff, 1997; Eitinger, 1964 and Matussek, 1975, all of whom developed categories of survival). In many studies, survivors offer multiple attributions for survival (Goldenberg, 2003, Matussek, 1975; Schiff, 2005; Suedfeld, 2003) and are more likely to give credit for their survival to external factors, such as luck or help from others, than to internal ones, such as intelligence and perceptiveness (Suedfeld, 2003; Goldenberg, 2003). In at

least one study, many survivors did not come up with an explanation for survival (Schiff and Cohler, 2001).

Age, nationality, appearance, language knowledge and sound of voice also played a role in survival (Croes, 2006, p. 484; see also Hilberg, 1993, p. 188). The death rate for Jewish children was close to 90% while it was about 67% for adults (Suedfeld, 2003, p. 133). Croes (2006) reports that age had a curvilinear effect on survival, and Hilberg (1993) notes that survivors were “relatively young, concentrated in the age group from the teens to the thirties” (p. 188). In Amsterdam, Jews of German nationality had the highest survival rate (Tammes, 2007). Looking Aryan significantly increased survival chances (Suedfeld, et al, 2002) as did “sounding Aryan,” for example, by speaking Polish fluently (Ben-Shlomo and Ben-Shlomo, 2007).

Findings about survival in terms of gender are contradictory. While boys passing as non-Jews or in hiding were in more danger of being revealed as Jewish due to circumcision, girls were less likely than boys to be chosen for slave labor, and more likely to be sent to death camps with parents (Gilbert, 1998, p. 2). Ringelheim (1985, p. 747) argues that women, as a result of their roles of nurturer and raising children in pre-war families, were more successful in participating in groups of nonbiological family members who took care of each other, which contributed to their survival. But they also were subject to rape and other forms of sexual violence, and the Nazis focused on murdering women as a way to prevent future generations from being born.

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In terms of class position and wealth, those who had financial resources sometimes could prolong their existence in ghettos and in hiding (Hilberg, 1993, p. 188), purchase false documents, bribe guards or pay money to be hidden, and purchase transportation (Tammes, 2007; Ben-Shlomo and Ben-Shlomo, 2007). Jews with particular occupational skills—such as physicians, carpenters, and tailors—also were more likely to survive since they were needed by their captors, had better social networks, and could influence individuals of authority (Ben-Shlomo & Ben-Shlomo, 2007; Berger, 2011, p. 21; Hilberg, 1993, p. 188). Levi (1989), for example, talks about how he was helped from his trade as a chemist (p. 140). Berger (1995, 2011) describes how the tailoring skill of his father and uncle served as an exchange for favors and foods inside and outside the camps. Other factors important to survival included physical stamina, mental health, location and timing, and the kind of work one had to do (Bluhm, 1948, p. 4; Hilberg, 1993, p. 188).

Hilberg (1993, pp. 188-189) asserts that the most critical component of survival was the psychological profile of the survivor, which contributed to agency (see also Berger, 1995). This profile included realism—which means realistically assessing the situation and environment—, presence of mind and ability to make decisions instantly, and an absolute determination to live. Summarizing survivor stories, Suedfeld (2003, p. 134) mentions the importance of determination, perseverance, initiative, and ingenuity; Linden (1993, p. 102) adds optimism to the mix, and also argues that survival was primarily a social process with people depending on each other for life itself.

Many researchers speak of the protective mental mechanisms of defense such as estrangement from self, psychic splits and blocking mechanisms that protected the individual from further trauma and thus from physical death and mental disintegration (Bluhm, 1948). Some use the language of attributions (Suedfeld, 2003); others the language of resources and strategies (Linden, 1993); still others the language of resilience (Greene and Graham, 2009). No matter the language, all seem to focus on the adaptive behaviors survivors used during horrible times in the war, such as resolving to live, making friends, banding together, and caring for others (Greene and Graham, 2009; see also Valent, 1998).

Some memoirists, even those who attribute survival to luck, concede that other factors may have had an effect on survival. According to Levi (1989), the “cultivated man [by which he means educated and of a higher socioeconomic class] generally was much worse off than the uncultivated man. Aside from physical strength, he lacked familiarity with the tools and the training, which however, his worker or peasant companion often had; in contrast, he was tormented by an acute sense of humiliation and destitution” (p. 132). Life in the barracks was harder for a cultivated person. The uncultivated man, writes Levi (1989), adjusted sooner to the idea that what was happening was not understandable and that it was helpful to forget, thus saving energy for fighting hunger and fatigue (pp. 142-143). Nevertheless Levi also makes a case for the value of an educated and cultured mind in that it “made it possible to reestablish a link with the past,” kept the mental faculties alive, reinforced identity, and provided a respite from the everyday (p. 139). Culture “served me well and perhaps it saved me,” writes Levi

(p.139). Frankl (2006), a psychoanalyst, tells how, to pull himself away from thinking about trivia and suffering, he often wrote on scraps of paper, gave lectures to imaginary audiences, and constructed text in his head that came from his psychoanalytic observations of the camps. Both Frankl and Levi note that a rich internal and spiritual life in the camps seemed to help people to survive in that it allowed them to escape into the past, experience beauty, and not give up hope for the future (see Levi, 1989, p. 146; Frankl, 2006, p. 36, 39, 70, 73, 104).

Frankl makes the case for hope and meaning as important factors in survival. “There is nothing in the world, I venture to say, that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one's life,” writes Frankl (2006, p. 103). Those who had given up, he claims, were more likely to die than those who were able to maintain a sense that their lives were still meaningful in the moment. Through love, work, and envisioning a future, people were able to conceive of suffering as an achievement, which enabled greater determination (2006, p. 102-104).

The importance of “meaning-making” is reiterated by researchers. Marilyn Armour (2010) examines through a questionnaire the meaning-making of one hundred and thirty-three Holocaust survivors. She found that during the Holocaust survivors kept hope alive through a set of skills that involved doing things to help the physical self stay alive and by “attaching to the moment of liberation and to what would be possible once the war was over” (p. 447). For example, survivors tried to look forward, kept loved ones close

in their minds, hoped for reunions, had loyal and close relationships with those around them, maintained faith in liberation, and fantasized about what would come after.

Of course, as Schiff (1997, p. 77) points out, we cannot really know the reasons for survival, only how survivors remember and tell it and social scientists interpret it. Both the survivors' memories and the social scientists' interpretations are partial at best. Stories are remembered and told backwards and interpreted retrospectively (Schiff, 1997, p. 77; see also Schiff and Cohler, 2001; Ellis, 2009; Freeman, 2010). "Memories are fashioned in continuous, weaving motions between 'past' and 'present' selves" (Linden, 1993, p. 112), affected not only by the events themselves but also all that has happened in the more than sixty five years since.

## **COMING TO A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF LUCK AND SURVIVAL**

I meet with Jerry to summarize what I have found in my exploration of the literature. "Most researchers and survivors agree with you that people survived because of luck," I tell him. "Yet many survivors tell stories that show their agency, and many researchers point out factors that intersected luck, from cultural conditions to psychological characteristics, including the ability to keep hope and meaning alive in their lives. Meaning seems to be especially important in survival. Did you have a sense that your life was meaningful?" "I didn't think much, if any, about meaning then," Jerry replies. "I'm not sure we, in our broken bodies, were capable of that kind of thinking. Really any thoughts I had were mired in that primal will to survive, to just live another day."

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“The will to survive in itself must have provided meaning,” I suggest, “even if you didn’t think of it that way.”

When Jerry shrugs, I realize that ‘meaning’ is how social scientists and historians think and talk, not how survivors do—unless they are academics, like Frankl. So I ask the question in a different way. “Did you think about death a lot?”

“No, I didn’t, at least not in the traditional ‘going to see my Maker’ sense. Death was not the problem, survival was. Nobody talked about death, which was so omnipresent that it lost its ‘allure’. Looking at the dead, or worse yet, at those starving and near the end of their lives, I thought about the extent of human suffering rather than the ‘ever after’.”

“That reminds me of the passage in Levi (1989, p. 76): when you’re dying or in the presence of death there are way too many things to think about and do—such as taking care of hunger, fatigue, and cold—to think about death,” I offer.

“Or meaning,” Jerry adds, holding back tears, his eyes staring into mine.

Stunned by the depth of what Jerry says, suddenly I experience a new level of understanding.

I see in front of me Jerry as a fourteen-year-old boy just trying to stay alive amidst other broken, crying, and dying bodies. Of course, I can’t really see that boy, but I hear the stories he tells now as an older man and feel the emotion with which he tells it. From

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viewing Holocaust movies, documentaries, and photos, I also have a visual image of how he might have appeared and acted back then. Still I have to wonder if I have fully considered what it meant to have these experiences at such a young age. I realize how difficult my questions are as I ask Jerry to recall being that boy who was obsessed with living another day, remember what was going through his head or heart, and explain his behavior.

Given the massive destruction and random slaughter all around—people starving and dying on the streets of the ghetto, being randomly shot, or routinely rounded up for transports—a sense of agency would have been difficult to sustain for Jerry, the young boy. Similar to other survivors, Jerry had lost most of his loved ones. While he did not know their exact fate, it was easy to extrapolate from his own circumstances. So while many survivors, including Jerry, might then and now describe moments in which their actions, skills, and quick thinking saved them, they also most likely realized that none of these things saved their lost loved ones or the people they saw dying in front of them. Similarly, they recognized that in the next moment, whatever they had done to survive so far might suddenly be for naught. That Jerry's skills helped him in this moment did not mean they would help him the next. As with other survivors, Jerry was continually bombarded by these moments while in the Warsaw Ghetto, most of which gave him little time to think and less time to act. Chance then trumped all possible explanations. Nothing else made sense. (Thanks to Henry Greenspan, personal communication, for these insights.)

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I look closely again, now focusing on the wise, elderly man in front of me. I realize how difficult it must be for him to try to analyze what happened in a way that corresponds to the trauma and feeling he has carried in his body for almost seventy years. No wonder he is having trouble with the concept of agency. No wonder he prefers to see what happened to him as luck. Luck is the only explanation that feels right to who he is now, that makes sense given what he has been through and lost, given the meaningless destruction and violence he now knows occurred all over Europe.

I think I more fully understand Jerry's position now than when I began this research. Still, I resist attributing all survival to nothing more than luck because this all-encompassing explanation reinforces the unfounded and unfortunate stereotype of Jews as passively failing to resist, and it dismisses humans' capacity to make choices and plan action. As scholars and memoirists have pointed out, forms of resistance occurred frequently among both heroes and ordinary folks, those who died and those who lived, those who fought until their last breath and those who committed suicide (for example, see Bauer, 2002; Marrus, 1995). Jerry's stories then honor all those who resisted in any way they could—by keeping silent, speaking up, smuggling food, leaving Jewish stars attached to clothing they packed to transfer from the camps (to send a signal to outsiders that Jews were being held and killed there), sabotaging the making of German bullets and equipment, continuing cultural and religious activities to strengthen morale, and writing down their experiences; or by refusing to give up, trying to live one more day, escaping or not trying to escape because it meant others would die, and even making the decision

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that death was the only way out. Jews weren't passive; they resisted all the time even within a situation in which they often felt powerless.

Jerry acknowledges the importance of raising questions about the unfounded stereotype of Jews as passive, though he still is not comfortable claiming agency for his own survival. As collaborative witnesses, both of us try to understand the other's stance on survival. "As a social scientist," he says, "you have to take a holistic and analytic view about what was going on. But as a survivor, I can only say what I experienced. I would be deranged to say that I survived because I was determined and smart." I understand that Jerry and I carry different voices in our heads and that affects how we talk about survival. Jerry hears the cries of his dead relatives, and he wants to honor their lives in whatever ways he can; I hear the voices of research scholars, and I want to offer them complex explanations using the vocabulary we share, such as meaning-making and agency. Our positions resist simplification into agreement or disagreement; instead, they provide avenues for continuing to explore the complexity of survival.

I realize there is more. As someone who now loves and cares about this man who has so generously shared his life with me—it is not surprising that I want to honor Jerry and celebrate him as a hero because that is who he has become to me. As I've listened to his stories, I have felt I could not have done the things he did. I would not have survived in his position. Most of us wouldn't. Most of them didn't. How did he? The explanation of luck seemed to camouflage so many important details of what he did to survive. I want to believe that he was at least partially in control of his fate, and special, not just lucky.

Yet Jerry does not want to be seen as a hero. He thinks of himself as an ordinary man doing the best he could under the circumstances. “I claim to be no more intelligent, brave, resourceful, inventive or heroic than others,” he says, thinking about the stories he has told. “But, on the other side of the ledger, I also was not any more cowardly, sinister, conniving, or unscrupulous than my peers, some of whom survived and some of whom perished.” And that’s a portrait I must honor as well, though he has become so much more than that to me.

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