

The Clean Shirt: A Flicker of Hope in Despair

By Carolyn Ellis and Jerry Rawicki

*Thanks to Arthur Bochner for insightful discussion and editing suggestions.

Abstract: As a young Jewish boy during the Holocaust, Jerry Rawicki was a courier for the Polish Underground in the Warsaw Ghetto. The Nazis murdered his father Abram, mother Sophie, and sister Stephanie. Passing as a Gentile, his surviving sister Fela worked in a coffee shop in Warsaw. Under the cover of groups leaving for hard labor outside the Ghetto, Jerry was able to surreptitiously steal away and attend to his assignments on the Polish side. Within the Ghetto, people were dying from dysentery, typhus, and starvation. Deportations were rampant and ominous rumors that death camps were the destinations, no matter how unbelievable, in time became a horrific reality. In January 1943, the Germans staged an action on a scale that foretold a total destruction of Jews in the Ghetto. The inhabitants' refusal to obey orders to vacate their apartments stunned the Germans. Armed resistance, mostly skirmishes, forced the Germans to back off, but the euphoria of prevailing over the Germans did not last long. On the night of April 18, 1943 during Passover, the Germans came back with fury. The armed resistance, this time more organized, held off the onslaught for over a week. But the fighters could not match the German firepower that turned the Warsaw Ghetto into a burning inferno. This story describes Jerry's actions on that night, at the age of fifteen, and afterwards, when he found hope in the midst of despair.

“What are you thinking so deeply about?” I ask. Jerry’s eyes water a bit, then clear. We have been working collaboratively for eight years, exploring Jerry’s experiences during and after the Holocaust.¹ I recognize the signs; something is bothering him. He sighs but doesn’t respond. Since he just got back from visiting Warsaw, his first return there in almost seventy years, I wonder if that trip stimulated a memory for him that continues to play out in his mind.

A waitress appears with bread and two cups of minestrone soup. “This is my favorite soup.” Jerry smiles as he blows on the first spoonful. “I order this every time I come here. You know that Carrabba’s was Helene’s favorite restaurant.”

“I know,” I say, acknowledging Jerry’s memory of his deceased wife. “Do you think of her when we come here?”

“Yes, every time.”

I dip the crusty bread into the herb-filled olive oil, then taste the thick and hearty soup. “It is very hot. Be careful,” I warn, making sure to blow longer on the second spoonful. The thyme, bay, and sage seasoning tickle my taste buds.

We eat in silence. Even though Jerry is in a contemplative mood, his 89-year-old face still reflects the joys of the last seven decades rather than the trials of the months he spent in the Warsaw Ghetto and the many losses he suffered there and since. Recognizing the importance of just being together and enjoying each other’s company, I don’t rush the conversation.

“I’m thinking about Warsaw,” Jerry says, when he’s finished his soup. “My visit back there after all these years was startling. I remember the streets running with blood during the

Holocaust; now the boulevards are lined with high rises and fancy stores. Cars and people fill the avenues.”

“The changes must have been shocking. But you’ve also said that your visit helped you come to terms with some of your memories. That what you remembered wasn’t there anymore, so that the past ceased to have the same effect on you.”

“Yes, I began to see that the past is history; the present is life.”

“You told me that you came to feel that history is bigger than your personal experiences, that the visit expanded your memory so that you don’t go directly to the vivid experience of the past now as you did before. Instead your memories now get blended with Warsaw in its current rendition.² Am I remembering your comments and interpreting them correctly?”

“Yes, you are. But still there are some things I can’t get out of my mind, no matter how much Warsaw had changed.”

“Things like what? Do you want to talk about them?”

“Where should I begin? With the hopelessness, helplessness, the eviscerating hunger—imagine talking about that while slurping my soup. Living—existing is a better word—from hour to hour in constant debilitating fear. This morning you complimented me on the blue \$90.00 BOGO shirt I was wearing. That reminded me of the mauve shirt. At a time like this, I can’t stop thinking about it. Hiding in a basement, I felt like a cellar rat; the clean mauve shirt made me feel like a human being again. It was my lifeline. I carried it everywhere, hoping it would conceal my unkempt, filthy body if I ever managed to escape my tomb. Just the thought of it made it a part of me; the shirt and me, a joint effort to survive.”

“You’ve mentioned this before. Did visiting Warsaw remind you again of the shirt?”

“Yes, what did it was seeing the remains of the Ghetto wall.³ I kept examining the bricks, asking myself how I not only got the shirt through that small opening in the wall, but got myself out that way as well. It’s a mystery. I keep trying to figure it out. Am I remembering this right?” Jerry looks at me quizzically.

Just then the entrees arrive. Jerry’s eyes light up as he dives into his Shrimp and Sea Scallop Spiedino. Appreciating his gusto, I concentrate on my Caesar salad and resist my desire to ask him more about the shirt.

Instead we comment on the food. “My favorite dish. I always order it here. Want to try some?” Jerry places a shrimp and scallop on my plate.

“Thanks. Very tasty. How about some salad?” Jerry shakes his head.

“Catch me up on your family,” I say, and our talk continues.

Despair in the Warsaw Ghetto

Jerry puts down his fork, pushes his plate away, takes a deep breath, and announces, “I shouldn’t have even been in the Ghetto that day.” He leans forward. The intensity on his face, tight lips, and deep sigh reveal the importance of the story about to ensue. I nod, push away my plate, and settle in for the story.

“I had been outside the Ghetto on an assignment for the Underground the day before the Germans attacked. I don’t recall whether I was delivering messages or getting supplies. I was supposed to be out the following day as well, but I was enticed by some friends to come for Passover Seder. I planned to stay only one night and return to the Aryan side of Warsaw to complete my assignment. But that was not meant to be.”

“What happened that night?”

“My friends and I had our Passover dinner. To get a good meal in the midst of the starvation all around was something special and the food was a real treat. We had finished eating and soon after midnight we heard some noise outside the Ghetto walls. From the third floor balcony, we saw that the Ghetto was surrounded by artillery, machine guns, armored vehicles, and flamethrowers.” Jerry closes his eyes. “I can see the building of the Polish High Court across the street. I can clearly see the massive carving into the front of the building: Temida, the Goddess of Law and Order, her eyes covered, holding a scale in one hand and a sword in the other. The lights in the building are turned on, which is unusual for that time of night. We see some movement on the roof. Then we hear shots. Then an impenetrable vacuum.” Jerry pauses, lost now in the remembering.

“What was it like? The fighting I mean.”

“The action started right away. I went back to my unit.” When I look questioningly at him, Jerry explains, “My unit, along with many others scattered around the Ghetto, made up the resistance. We fought for two or three days though we had few weapons, mostly some homemade Molotov cocktails, to combat their overwhelming force. About half of us had revolvers but not much ammunition.”

“Did you have a pistol?”

“Yes.” Jerry nods, but doesn’t elaborate. “There were so many instances of heroism that you can’t begin to imagine.” Jerry shakes his head and sighs. “People with side arms were attacking tanks. It was suicidal. We knew we would not be able to accomplish much, but we wanted to die while resisting. The resistance lasted for just over a week; after that there were just sporadic skirmishes. The Germans incinerated house by house, building by building, and killed everyone in sight.”

“After you ran out of ammunition, what did you do?”

“I went into hiding in a cellar of a crumbling abandoned building in the Wild Ghetto.⁴ I stayed there, I’m not sure for how long, maybe for weeks. I lived off the rotten potatoes and apples I found in the cellar. After the war, it came out that the fermented, liquefied potatoes were what the Germans brought with them while fleeing from the Russians.”⁵

“I can’t imagine how you survived. What was it like to be in the cellar?”

Jerry closes his eyes, returning to the cellar in his imagination. “I’m very weak. I inhale some noxious gasses from the decomposing apples. Weeks of wallowing in a miasma of putrefied potatoes dull my senses. It’s very quiet, everything that stood upright has been demolished, a peculiar stench is overpowering. I have dysentery and scabies and I itch. My hands and body are bloody from scratching.” Jerry starts to scratch his arms. “I know I have to get out and begin to live.”

“Were you able to leave the cellar?” I place my hand gently on his arm to halt his scratching.

“Only at night or I’d be caught. With two other boys who were hiding with me, I went out several times to try to find a way out of the Ghetto. The ruins, of course, were heavily guarded. We thought that maybe we could find part of the wall we could scale, or maybe a section of it had been damaged by the artillery barrage. We tried many, many times. Finally, the other two guys disappeared—I don’t know what happened to them—and I was left alone in that cellar.”

The Clean Shirt

“And is this where the shirt comes in?”

“Yes, I spend my days dreaming of finding food and eventually seeing my sister. She is my incentive for surviving. I know she knows I am in the Ghetto, and I want to let her know I have survived. All I can think of is going to meet her, to show her I am alive. I don’t know what I look like, but everything on me is wet. I know I don’t smell right. I doubt my sister could even recognize me. All I know is that if I am wearing the rags I have on when I get out, I’ll be caught right away. But throughout this whole ordeal, I have my clean shirt with me.” I note Jerry’s return to the present tense, as though he is reliving the story. He clears his throat several times.

“So tell me more about the shirt.”

“It is my Sunday’s best. I had worn it for the Passover Seder. I remember that the color was mauve and it had epaulettes. I always liked those. I don’t know what made me take off my shirt when I first got into that cellar, but I’m glad I did. The shirt and I become inseparable. I love its constant company. It is my life preserver. So soft and cozy, it is the only love I have. I treasure this shirt more than life itself; it is life. I think about how I will be enveloped in that shirt. I fold and tie a string around it to make it into a small package. I always carry it with me, aloft if I can, though I have little strength. I never sleep on it, even when I am tempted to use it as a pillow. If it is to serve my purpose when I escape the Ghetto, it has to be presentable, and not stand out from what everyone else is wearing. I must keep it clean and neat. For how it shields and soothes me, I promise it will never again touch flesh of grime and despair. If not for its symbol of cleanliness and normalcy, I would have given up.”

“So what happened?”

“This day I was disoriented. I left the cellar during daylight. It might have been May or June by then. I remember it was a sunny day. I was caught by a patrol looking for wretches like me who were coming out of hiding—you know, like rats, to find a way to escape from the

Ghetto. They snagged us, me and fifteen to twenty other Jews. The auxiliary army of Latvians or Ukrainians marched us to a staging point of no return—the Umschlagplatz, a guarded plaza that separated the Ghetto from the Polish section of Warsaw. Here there would be no escape. Here we would be deported to a death camp. Here the Nazis could succeed in their quest to destroy us. We already were within maybe one or two hundred yards of the Umschlagplatz when suddenly a shot rang out, possibly from a building outside of the Ghetto. Immediately the Germans, who had artillery and machine guns and armored vehicles at various street corners, started pounding the building the shot came from. Everybody fell to the ground, including our escorts. But I took off running into some rubble of a building and I hid there.

“I stayed there all night, barely moving. I can remember the beautiful night sky and the moon. Then the nibbling rats woke me up. I got up before daylight and again tried to find a place where I might get through the wall. A few other guys were milling around and one of them had a grenade. He spotted a place in the wall where a few bricks were missing, and hurled the grenade. There was a big bang, a tremendous explosion, and we all ran away, afraid we might be caught again. I came back later, and the opening did not seem to change in size. It was small; only two or three bricks were out. I decided to take a chance anyway.”

Jerry stops his story to ask the waitress for hot tea. I order some as well and wait for Jerry to continue. “Don’t keep me in suspense.” I nod for him to go on.

“So I put my hand holding this shirt through the opening.” As Jerry demonstrates with his hands, tears form in his eyes. I wait for him to continue. “The wall was about a foot thick and I didn’t know what I would find on the other side. But even if I didn’t get out, I wanted to make sure the shirt did. Then I squeezed myself sideways through the opening. How, I don’t know. I still see that opening in the wall and how tiny it was. I was a skinny and emaciated boy, of

course, but I don't know how it was possible to get through a space the size of a few bricks, not more than four. How can a boy go through that? You know I'm claustrophobic now and I don't know whether this trauma made me claustrophobic or whether I had trouble with small spaces before that."

"Maybe the blast enlarged the hole more than you remember?"

Jerry closes his eyes and tries to visualize the opening. "Maybe it did get bigger after the blast and I'm remembering the size before that." He shakes his head. "Anyway, it was already almost dawn when I got through the wall. On the other side, there was a commercial railroad station. A German hospital train was parked there that had brought wounded German soldiers from the Russian front. The train was surrounded by hobos, winos, and other homeless people asking for food and cigarettes.

"I noticed there was a water pump at the station. So I took my old tattered undershirt off, which was just rags, and I threw it away. Then I washed myself up a little, my face and hands, and put on my clean shirt. I went towards the train. A young guy was there—I still see his face now—in blue pajamas. He looked friendly, so I asked him for something to eat. It was early morning now and the soldiers were eating breakfast. By then I knew some German. I said, "*Etwas zu essen?* Something to eat?" And he gave me a canteen with macaroni and cheese. It was my first meal in weeks, courtesy of the German army. I gobbled it up. After I had this meal, I went back to the guy, and I tried to look like I wasn't that anxious to eat. I very nonchalantly said to him, '*Danke schön,*' 'thank you very much,' pretending to be a Polish street kid. It felt good to feel human again. Then I left to see my sister.

"I didn't have any money, and I was weakened from the scabies and malnutrition. The skin between my fingers was raw and bleeding, so I had to conceal my hands. I jumped on a

streetcar and stood on the edge. When a conductor approached asking for the fare, I jumped off and waited for another streetcar, the same way I had navigated Polish Warsaw before the uprising.”

“What was it like to see your sister?”

“I don’t remember how it felt, but I do remember my sister was speechless. She thought I was an apparition because she had assumed I was dead. She told me that the bosses and employees of her cafe would get on the roof of the building at night and watch the spectacle of the Ghetto burning. Many people, of course, were mortified by it, but a few made jokes, and she had to go along with them. Some would say, ‘Oh, the Jews are burning’ and act happy because soap could be made from the fat. When she got her speech back that day, she told me to sit down and have breakfast, as though I were a regular customer. After that, I’d go by most days and she’d feed me and give me money and clothes. I just stayed around the area, sometimes sleeping in attics of buildings and sometimes on park benches. I’d get some liquor and swish it in my mouth, pretending to be a drunk so they wouldn’t suspect I was a Jew.

“Then one day I met a Polish boy at the beach—you know that story.⁶ I admitted to him that I was Jewish and he let me hide in his family’s cellar for a while. After the war I found out that he had been arrested and executed by hanging. Though I don’t know for sure that he paid with his life for hiding a Jew, still his death haunts me to this day.” Jerry’s voice quivers. He blows his nose before continuing. “Soon after, I left Warsaw to work on a farm in the country, continuing to pass as a Gentile.”

“And what happened to the shirt?”

“I don’t remember. Once I put it on, I was done with it. I was free, euphoric. Compared with the time in the cellar, life was a piece of cake.”

Just then our tea arrives. “Speaking of cake, do you want some desert with the tea?” I shake my head, sensing that Jerry has finished telling his story.

The Shirt as a Symbol of Hope

“Now I understand better your quirk about showers, clean shirts, and dressing well. I’ve seen you in your workshop before and you’re dressed as though you’re going out to a fancy dinner. Even today when I showed up unexpectedly, you were adamant about showering and changing your shirt before you would come to lunch with me, when all you’d been doing all day was working on the computer.”

Jerry laughs. “I’ve been like that ever since Warsaw. Helene would get upset with me. I’d come home from the office and she’d say, ‘Let’s go to dinner. Put on something nice.’ I’d say, ‘Okay but I have to take a shower and put on a clean shirt first.’ And the shirt had to be soft and cozy. No starch for me. I always felt that I was reenacting something, though I wasn’t conscious what it was.”

“Interesting that a clean shirt continues to be so important to you today. Now you have a closet full of clean shirts, but still they hold the same meaning for you. I’m reminded of your response to the professor in the class you took at CCNY when you first came to America.”

“I don’t see the connection.”

“You told me that the professor made so much fun of your use of words...”

“You mean the ones I got out of the thesaurus?”

“Yes, and you reacted by learning as many English words as you could.”

“Sure, I collected words to help me exist in the New World. Interesting, now I can see the connection—how I collect shirts like I collected words.”

“And now you have one of the best English vocabularies of anybody I know, though English is your second language.”

“And probably one of the best set of shirts.” Jerry laughs.

“As with words, clean shirts are sacred to you. They represent human dignity.”

“In retrospect, I doubt the shirt really was clean, since I had it in the cellar for days.”

“Still it must have been clean enough for you to pass as just another urchin on the street.”

Jerry nods.

“I think clean shirts also provide a form of resistance to what happened to you in the Ghetto,” I continue, as we sip out tea. “A resistance to the filth you had to live in...”

“A resistance to being treated as a dirty animal, not being seen as a human being.”

“Do you think clean shirts continue to be an important symbol of survival for you?”

“I haven’t thought about it in that way, but they continue to be the moral equivalent of cleanliness, as symbolized by the shirt in my story.”

“It reminds me of how important it was for survivors to have children and grandchildren, to signify that the Nazis didn’t win. Maybe clean shirts stand for something of the same.”

Jerry nods. “Though I wasn’t conscious of all this symbolism at the time, I knew I had to have something that would make me look like a human being. Primarily then the shirt was functional, merely a tool. Now I realize it was bigger than that.”

“As always, you were practical. You figured out what was needed and made it happen (see Ellis and Rawicki, 2013).”

“The shirt was the sine qua non I would need to be able to pass as non-Jewish.”

“The shirt erased your Jewish otherness. You could pass as a poor Polish kid on the street.”

“And then the same thing happened when I used the smell of alcohol to pass as a drunk.”

“Yes, much safer than being identified as a Jew.”

“Much safer. And both cases demonstrate that agency you always talk about.”

I smile and nod. “And yes I know, you could have all the agency in the world and without luck you still wouldn’t have survived...”

“Yes, the luck of the gun firing causing the bedlam when they marched us toward the Umschlagplatz, the luck of finding the opening in the wall, for starters.”

“But without agency, the ability to figure out what to do and how to do it, and then enact it, luck wouldn’t have saved you either.”

Now Jerry smiles and nods, as we both remember our ongoing discussion of luck and agency as factors in survival in the Holocaust (Ellis & Rawicki, 2014).

“As you’ve said, the shirt was probably the difference between your surviving and dying. But the shirt was more than just a practical solution, more even than a symbol of human dignity; it was a symbol of hope for survival, of hope that you would have a future. Do you remember reading Frankl’s (2006/1959) book on *Man’s Search for Meaning*?”

“Of course.”

“He said that the most important factor in people holding on and not giving up during the Holocaust was to have faith in and hope for a future. They needed to imagine a future and have a concept of it, one with content.”

“The shirt gave me that. Though I may not have thought in these terms then, the shirt gave me a sense that I might be able to get out of the Ghetto and wear it one day. It was a real thing, something to hold onto.”

“Yes, that reminds me of Frankl’s story about the advice he was given when he arrived at Auschwitz. Another prisoner told him to ‘shave daily, even if you have to use a piece of glass to do it...even if you have to give your last piece of bread for it.’ The informant explained, ‘You will look younger and the scraping will make your cheek ruddier. If you want to stay alive, there is only one way: look fit for work’ (p. 19).

“Just like wearing your shirt, shaving was a small act, but it was an important symbolic as well as functional act: it gave the prisoners a way to feel self-respect and dignity, to not give up, and to envision surviving.”

“Yes, I had no mirrors. I didn’t know what I looked like or how to change my appearance. I might have given up if I had seen myself and how awful I appeared. But this shirt was something normal I could hold onto. It was my lifeline, my ticket to freedom.”

“You had to have a pretty optimistic spirit to think there was even the possibility you were going to make it.”

“I guess the only way you could describe me at that age is to say I was optimistic. Optimistic and determined to stay alive. The need to survive is a strong force. Like we’ve talked about before, some of my abilities developed from an acquired sense of danger and from instincts that arose in response to having to live like a hunted animal (Ellis & Rawicki, 2014).

“The other thing keeping me alive was my desire to see my sister—my future orientation. That’s all I could think about. It kept me going.”

“It gave your life meaning, which as Frankl (2006/1959, p. 104) says can help one survive ‘even the worst conditions.’ Frankl goes on to claim, after Nietzsche, that ‘he who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*’ (Frankl, 2006/1959, p. 76). He says thoughts of

his wife made his life meaningful and helped keep him alive. Your sister was your why and the shirt became the means of survival and the symbol of survival at the same time.”

“It amazes me that I remember so many details of this story now.”

“It’s because of how important this time was to you.”

“Yes I think so, though it might seem important because I remember so many of the details. Perhaps the story has grown in importance in the telling over time—and now in our conversation.”

“Perhaps. But that’s okay because it is an important story. I recall that you mentioned the shirt in our very first interview, and it’s a story that has come up over and over in many of our conversations, not just today. It’s good to work through the details of the fuller story now.”

“This conversation reminds me of something I had forgotten.”

“Tell me.”

“Before I got reparation from Germany some years ago, I had to first be evaluated by a psychologist. He asked me many questions and I told him about my experiences. But interestingly the shirt never came up. I didn’t have a relationship with him like I have with you and I answered only the questions he asked me. Only now, since we have uncovered in our conversation the symbolism of the shirt, does it loom so important to me in understanding how it continues to affect my life.”

“Does that mean you’ll stop being obsessed with clean shirts now?” I smile, offering a hand to Jerry as he starts to get up. Waving off my hand, Jerry pushes up off the table instead.

“That’s doubtful. Hard to teach an old dog new tricks. Besides I like looking dapper.”

Jerry laughs. “Let’s go. I want to show you some woodworking I did this week. That helps me,

to work with my hands. Though different from the shirt, it gives my life meaning too. That, and my family and loved ones.”

“It’s good you have that work and your family.”

“Yes, it is. I also get meaning from sharing my experiences with others. It makes me feel I’m contributing something to the memory of the Holocaust. Working with you does that as well. Speaking of work, I have a computer problem I thought you might assist me with.”

“Let’s do it.”

Jerry grabs the check before I can. “My treat. You know, it’s always so much fun being with you. That may sound strange since we talk about suffering, but it’s true.”

I smile and nod in agreement. “There’s meaning in suffering (Frankl, 2006/1959).” Jerry nods.

“These conversations and our relationship are enjoyable for me too. I learn so much from them and they provide meaning in my life as well. I’ll never think of a clean shirt as just a simple clean shirt again.” I take Jerry’s arm and this time he holds on. So do I.

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Endnotes

¹ To write this story, I first examined all the transcripts of my interviews with Jerry in which he mentioned the shirt and this particular period in the Ghetto. Then I interviewed Jerry again about this experience, asking detailed questions to encourage him to remember as many details as he could. In writing the first draft, I then called on all the transcripts as I sought to use the words he spoke in his stories. After the first version, Jerry and I met to discuss the draft and Jerry had many comments and suggestions about the form—in terms of novelistic and ethnographic elements—as well as the content, which I incorporated. We talked on the phone and in email about the story. Jerry and I passed the manuscript back and forth approximately ten times, with each one of us editing and commenting on the text. Finally, we met together with what was close to the final draft and videotaped our final discussion of the article. This approach is an example and extension of “compassionate research” that takes place collaboratively between researchers and participants. See Ellis, 2017.

² See Bochner 2007, who discusses the connection between what one remembers in the present and what calls the person to those memories.

³ Jerry at the remains of the Ghetto Wall, July 2013.



⁴ The Wild Ghetto was a part of the Warsaw Ghetto that had not been inhabited since the deportations in summer 1942, except by those Jews, smugglers, and thieves hiding from the Nazis. See Kurzman, 1993, p. 28.

⁵ In March 1943, the Judenrat had to figure out how to get rid of 3000 tons of rotting potatoes the Germans had delivered to the Ghetto (Laqueur & Baumel, 2001).

⁶ In several interviews, Jerry told me the story of meeting some boys at the beach and confiding to one of them that he was Jewish. For example, see Rawicki and Ellis, 2009.