# Beyond Testimony and Trauma

## ORAL HISTORY IN THE AFTERMATH OF MASS VIOLENCE

Edited by Steven High

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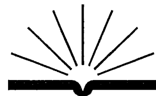

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# 7 | Sharing "A Big Kettle of Soup"

## Compassionate Listening with a Holocaust Survivor

CHRIS PATTI

### Beginning at the End

Monday, 20 February 2012, 8:45 AM, Sandy calls to tell me that Sal's been in the hospital for two days and his health is declining. For the past year Sal had been dealing with colon cancer, but I did not know how much he had deteriorated recently. Sandy says Sal wants to see me, and I tell her I'll be there as soon as I can, at 3:30 PM, after I finish teaching my interpersonal communication class. After I hang up the phone, I don't feel right. A few minutes later I follow my instincts, cancel class, and head immediately to visit Sal at St. Joseph's Hospital, in Tampa, Florida. As I walk out of the elevator on the fifth floor, Sandy is at the end of the hall waiting. She smiles as I get closer and says, "We're so glad you're here."

"I'm honoured to be here," I reply.

She looks strong but drained and says warmly, "Sal brightened up when we told him you were coming."

Her words fill my heart. I say, "I want you and Sal to know what a profound effect our time together has had on me, how much talking with him has changed my life."

### Two Years Earlier

Monday, 1 March 2010, 9:30 AM. Location: Wainberg residence.

It's a beautiful spring day in Tampa, Florida. I am headed to meet Salomon and Sandra Wainberg for the first time. After Carolyn Ellis, my dissertation supervisor, interviewed Mr. Wainberg for our Holocaust survivor oral history project with the University of South Florida

Libraries and Florida Holocaust Museum (FHM),[1] she sensed that he and I would connect. She had a feeling he might make a good collaborator for my dissertation research on cultivating a compassionate, ethnographic approach to working with Holocaust survivors. Having conducted eleven videotaped and archived oral history interviews for the FHM project, my dissertation seeks to collaborate more conversationally with three survivors in particular in order to form ongoing relationships and to hear things not traditionally heard in oral history interviews.[2] Thoughts swirl in my mind as I drive into a charming, upper-middle class community on a golf course in the semi-rural Tampa suburb of Lutz.

I arrive early and Sal is still out, but Sandy takes me in and shows me their immaculately kept home. Lovely art and artefacts from their travels adorn the walls and display cases: traditional Jewish pieces – paintings and richly coloured glasswork – as well as Hindu prints and Asian brass items. I sit with Sandy at her white kitchen table, which matches the white curtains drawn open on the window beside. We start chatting, my audio recorder already on.

Sandy listens as I explain my project. "I want to find people who would like to connect, where it's hopefully rewarding for the survivors as well as me. I think that's something that's missing in the documentation of the Holocaust."

"I agree," she says with a smile.

I add excitedly, "In the standard 'tell-me-your-life-story' interview, they don't broach topics like 'What's your opinion on how the Holocaust is thought about today, and all of these movies about the Holocaust?' Starting in the '70s there was a miniseries called *Holocaust* on NBC, and then there's *Schindler's List* in 1993."

Sandy responds, "Well the interesting thing about the movies is that my introduction to the Holocaust – being I was born in the United States and not having the experience myself – was with *Judgment at Nuremberg*."

"Wow," I say, drawn to her openness and how she words things. Just then, Sal arrives home, entering through the garage door, situated next to the kitchen where Sandy and I are seated. Without a break he sits down, and his jovial presence takes centre stage.

"Have you started without me?" Sal jokes. I fumble a bit and explain that we can talk about whatever we want with no thought about beginning and ending, and I give him the Institutional Review Board

release form for our project. He seems wary of me at first. His laboured breathing, audible on the recording, indicates slight agitation. *I've accosted him*, I think – already being there talking with Sandy, not allowing him time to arrive home peacefully or collect his thoughts. We begin anyway.

I reiterate: "I'm hoping that we can have a conversation that seems interesting to you. Do you have any questions?"

"No, go ahead," he says.

"That makes sense?"

Sal's response is quintessential: "Well, I'll find out if it makes sense as it progresses. But I'm willing." Sandy and I laugh at his directness.

Soon after my awkward start, Sal begins to see what Sandy already felt. By twenty minutes into our first conversation, we are connecting. Sal clarifies his motive to tell: "Whatever I can do regardless of how silly it is, how disgusting it is, how wonderful it is, how terrific it is – I will go to any length to let one more person find out about the Holocaust." Sandy laughs.

I respond, "I really appreciate your willingness to talk with me, and also I hope that through this process – and this is kind of a selfish hope – that our time together is meaningful to you."

"It is," he reassures me.

"Absolutely," says Sandy. "Every time he speaks it makes it more comfortable for him to say."

Over the next two years our conversations flowed, circling around many topics. We talked about his experience, memory, and history; about his and Sandy's relationship as it related to his telling; about popular culture; and about why and how it was that we feel called to share his story. I audio-recorded five of our meetings, totalling more than ten hours in length. We also left many of our meetings as friendly, unrecorded conversations. Our relationship and discussions deepened with each meeting, leading to our final interaction.

My goal here is to show some of "the meat" (to use Sal's words) of our time together – what happened between us, the distinct nature of our collaboration, and the heart of what we have to share. I do this by highlighting four key themes, or moments, from our interactions, using our conversational voices as recorded. First, I show how Sal came to tell his story, initially to Sandy and then to the world; second, I note in Sal's words what telling has brought him; third, I demonstrate the relationship and connection we formed; and fourth, I answer the question, "Why do we tell?"

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These dialogues provide the context for my ethnographic telling of our final conversation, which expresses the life-and-death heart of our work. My method focuses on cultivating compassion, a risky motive for academics and oral historians, adding particular, humane voices to the collaborative witnessing approaches demonstrated in this collection, complementing work done by Greenspan; Greenspan and Bolkosky; High; Rawicki and Ellis; Rubin and Greenspan; Sheftel and Zembrzycky; and the Montreal Life Stories project.[3] Instead of adopting a distanced, critical perspective on my relationship with Sal,[4] I offer it as an intimate, vulnerable work of love. As High points out, authors in this lineage are "not only self-aware, continually reflecting on their location in the research process; they are writing deeply personal articles."[5] This is a deeply personal chapter about my relationship with a Holocaust survivor. It goes beyond traditional categories of interviewer-interviewee and diverges from traditional modes of scholarly representation. I begin with a condensed version of Sal's experiences during the Second World War to provide context for the conversations that follow.

## The Wainberg/Boruchowicz Family during the Second World War

Sal (pronounced "Saul") is a seventy-four-year-old Jewish Holocaust survivor born on 15 April 1936 in the small, Eastern Polish shtetl of Zelechów. His name at birth was Sholom Wainberg (spelled "Szulim Wajnberg" in Polish). His father Chaim Meyer and mother Perla were successful merchants, selling goods at their regional wholesale store, which had been passed down over generations on Sal's mother's side of the family – the Boruchowicz side. The family store had a monopoly on sugar, cigarettes, and herring, and their house was across the street. At the time of the war, Sal had two older sisters, Riwka and Sara, and a younger brother, Abraham.

His first vivid childhood memory has a specific date – 1 September 1939 – the day Germans invaded Poland. It was the first time he had seen an airplane. As Sal marvelled at the planes overhead, he was hoping to see a helicopter, something he had learned about from his sickly, bookish cousin but could not imagine. That night, Sal's family fled, hiding first in the attic of his mother's sister's fianceé's bicycle and sewing machine shop with thirty-nine others. There they stayed for sixteen days as their town was destroyed.

Sal's father, mother, and siblings moved by cover of night eleven kilometres away to Wilczka. There they hid in the cellar of the Sokols, a Polish family the Wainbergs paid to feed and hide them. Mr. Sokol was the brother-in-law of a family friend, Edward Turek, a man Sal called an "angel." For two years during the war, Sal and his family hid in that cellar – what Sal called "the *grub*" (meaning "grave," "dungeon," or "pit" in Yiddish), eating "nothing soup" – with another Jewish family, the Popovskas. Mr. Sokol also allowed a wounded Russian soldier to hide with the families. Having no rapport with the adults (because he was another mouth to feed), the Russian man connected with Sal and the bored children. He taught Sal Russian songs and they carved a chess set together out of branches that Mr. Sokol brought for the Russian. The man demonstrated to Sal what each chess piece looked like by moulding it out of bread first. Once healed, the mysterious man left and was never heard from again.

Time became meaningless as the months and years passed until bandits found Sal's family. Sal's mother and father believed that Edward Turek's brother, Vladislav, had given the family's location away. The bandits murdered Sal's aunt Gitel Schiffman, his sister Riwka, and two young men hidden with Sal's family – "the Popovska boys." Facing death, Sal's father improvised a *bubbe-meise* (a fictional story) to spare the lives of his family by promising to lead the bandits to what they were after – the supposed Boruchowicz fortune. After years of paying to hide, there was no fortune left, but Sal's father's story allowed him and his family to escape just before dawn.

The Wainbergs spent the next few months wandering and hiding in rye and wheat fields; nearly dying of thirst, hunger, and exposure; surviving on cunning and the hard kernels from the fields. Before sunrise on 2 August 1944, they heard Russian voice in the distance. Sal acted as the tiny translator for his family, telling the soldiers, "We're Jewish – we're Jews: *Yevreyski*." The Wainbergs were liberated. Soon after, Sal's family immigrated to Costa Rica and opened a new store. By sixteen, Sal moved to Detroit to study at a Yeshiva, nearly becoming an orthodox rabbi, before he became "unorthodox." Years later, as Sal got his start in finance and studied at the University of Miami, he met Sandy, a pretty Jewish-American girl, and in 1965 they wed. Sandy knew Sal's family had a "dark secret," but she loved him enough not to pry, even though she felt like an outsider.

### I. Coming to Tell Sandy and the World

During our first interview, I ask Sal if he feels telling his story publicly has changed him. He says: "Our life definitely has changed because I think Sandy understands a lot of my shortcomings now, my bad habits. I realized how, I guess, irritating I can sometimes be."

Sandy responds, laughing, "How, your 'coming out' has changed?" We join in laughing at her wording. She continues: "You can't imagine. We were married in 1965. I knew he was a survivor, but I never asked him anything about his survival. I did that knowingly and with respect, because I saw that if I would bring up something like that it would hurt him. We were married for ten years and his being a survivor was only something in his life. It didn't impact mine, except that there was a whole lot of my husband that I didn't know about. Anyway, one of the joys we share is the love of travel. We were going on one of our many trips. This time we were going to Eastern Europe. This was back in '73, right?"

"Yeah," Sal says at a whisper, letting her continue.

"Early on in being able to visit communist Russia, Poland, and East and West Berlin, it wasn't a common place to go. So we were very excited. I was excited for the cultural experience. But it didn't occur to me that Sal had another purpose. He had made contact with the family in Poland that saved him. He was going over there to make contact, to see them."

Sal adds, "To visit and to show her where I was born."

"To show me – " she says.

Sal finishes her sentence in a deep, gravelly voice, "where I came from."

"Yeah," I say, amazed, saying as little as I can to allow their co-telling to continue.

Sandy goes on: "I was totally unaware of this. So we got on the long plane ride. In those days Sal couldn't read on an airplane. He would get airsick. So what else can you do?"

"They didn't have movies then," he jokes.

"Talk to your partner," Sandy says. She adds: "So, after ten years of marriage, he told me his survival story. I was dumbfounded. I could not absorb everything that he was telling me. It was too painful, too shocking, so unexpected, and he told me we were gonna' meet this family. I was amazed. We had travelled to many places in the world before this. And Sal is a very strong, independent, unafraid, know-it-all kind of

person. Very, very self-confident. When he got off the plane in Poland he became a child. He held on to me. He was shaking. I've never seen him like this. I said, 'What's the matter?' He couldn't put it into words. But it occurred to me, finally, that he was frightened. I said 'What are you frightened of?' You know this is so many years later, twenty-five years later. He said to me, which I didn't realize, it didn't occur to me at all, that he was of draft age and he was carrying a passport that said he was born in Poland. He was afraid that the Polish government was going to capture him and put him in the army."

"Wow," I say.

"There was no sense to what he said," she clarifies.

"Well, no," he admits. Sal explains: "When you listen to my story, you might realize that the way we finally left Poland was running away."

Sandy adds, "The shame or the fear – "

"The fear," Sal emphasizes.

She continues, "Or whatever he felt at that point was transferred into this feeling of utter desperation."

Sal repeats once more: "Fear. I was walking on glass."

When I ask Sal how he became involved with telling his story publicly, he says: "It wasn't really 'till the [Florida Holocaust] Museum got me to speak out that I started – and like I said before, the first few times were murder. I would come home exhausted. Whereas now I come home and feel satisfied that perhaps I changed the life of one of the kids. 'Cause, when I talk to the kids, I do include some preaching of tolerance."

I respond, "Yes, I think that's so important coming from someone who has been through that experience. I think that for me it's not only your story – "

"No," Sal agrees and sees where I'm going.

I continue, "that we can learn from but your perspective – "

"Right," Sal says.

I add, "living with that story. I think that's wisdom." I ask Sal to clarify how telling has shaped him: "You say, 'Telling brings me more than relief, it washes my soul.' That's really interesting to me."

He runs with the thought: "There's two things that have happened to me since I started talking at the museum. I think the most important part is that I don't dwell on it like I used to, on the bad parts and stuff. It almost has become a story as far as I'm concerned. As a matter of fact, one of the problems I have with the museum now is they want to restrict

my time. And I refuse. Because I say I have to tell the story. I can't just, you know, do like this [chops his hand in the air three times]. But more importantly, there are a lot of things, a lot of names, a lot of places that have become clearer in my mind."

Sal tells me a few moments later: "But I think the other thing is, and I say this to the kids a lot of times, when you first start talking about the Holocaust you'll say, 'This should never happen again.' But it's happening again almost every day. And I think that's what we have to realize, too. So until everybody knows and realizes that it happened and that it could happen again, I think it will. And that's the sad part." Later he adds: "And before that [telling publicly], whenever I would have an inclination to tell, nobody wanted to listen. Now I was in a crowd that wanted to listen, so it's very different. Really, it was *Schindler's List* and Spielberg. I think he should be canonized because he brought the awareness."

"He made it okay to want to know," I say.

"He made it okay to want to know and he made it okay to want to tell. It wasn't until the museum found me that I started to tell. And, Chris, I'll guarantee you I'm not the only one."

"Pretty much every survivor I've spoken with has a similar story of becoming a storyteller, having an audience to tell to," I agree.

Sal reasserts, "If you want to thank somebody – Spielberg."

"It's interesting that you say that. As I've been reading more about this, academics are pretty critical of Steven Spielberg and the film.[6] They say the story was from a German perspective, that the Holocaust is the backdrop. And you're shaking your head."

"That's not true," Sal says. "Yes, he had to use that venue, but look what he did!"

"It doesn't make it any less important," I agree. "Actually, one of the things that historians will admit is that the facts of that movie are very accurate."

"That is important to the historians," he tells me. "To me that's not important at all. What's important is he brought the awareness, where people actually started asking. Then, when they ask, people feel better about telling. So to me it's – " Sal pauses for a moment and then continues, now directing his thought towards our project. "And you should probably use that idea in your dissertation. You're welcome," he smiles.

Stunned and pleased that he is concerned with my dissertation and explicit about including this thought, I respond: "I, I, I will. I will."

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## II. What Telling has Brought Sal: "A Big Kettle of Soup"

Reviewing Sal's different phases of memory and telling over his life, I say: "So, you're a young man, you're very busy. Then when you retire things changed, the museum comes into play, speaking comes into play. Now when you think about your memory, it seems like there are some memories that are still as vivid as if they happened yesterday. You're following images in your mind when you're telling them."

"Right," Sal says softly.

I ask, "What is that like?"

Here Sal shares with me what has become my model for the mind and what motivates us to remember and tell our experience. His insight also speaks to how we might be able to share, through deep telling and listening together, more of the complex mysteries of our human experiences. Sal says: "Somehow, I have a feeling, if I continue telling, there are going to be other discoveries that I make in my mind. Some of the stuff that I remember are quite – I don't know what to say – quite alarming details. Like, I could almost see [Mr.] Popovska spitting up blood right in front of us. On the other hand are the things that I try to remember that I can't remember. My mom had five sisters, and I can only remember one of them dying. This little cousin of mine, same name as mine, six years younger than me – I don't know when he died. It's something that I've tried to get my sister to tell me and she either doesn't know or doesn't want to know. Unfortunately, there you go again, I didn't think of asking when my mom could have told me. And that bothers me. I'm hoping maybe someday it will – "

Sandy finished his thought, "It'll come."

I agree, "It'll come. I think it's in there."

Sal explains, "Oh, I'm sure it's in there. It's just a question of how to get it out. *The mind is like a big kettle of soup*."

"Mm-hmm," I say, marvelling at his metaphor, reflecting on the "nothing soup" he ate in the *grub*.

He continues: "In that, if you dig long enough, you'll find the meat, and you'll find the stuff that you like. And that's why I'm digging." Sandy and I laugh at how enlightening his statement is.

Sandy says, "There you go! Ah, boy."

"That's one of those quotes," I say, still laughing. "I love that. You make my job so easy when you say things like that." We all laugh.

### III. Our Connection and Relationship

As our interviews progressed over the years, our friendship blossomed. Sal, being a kind man and generous host, always asked if I wanted anything to eat or drink while we spoke. Each time I happily accepted his offers, and we shared grilled cheese sandwiches, coffee with a little hot chocolate mixed in, and, on one occasion, the "Sal special" (scrambled eggs mixed with steamed cauliflower and onions). By an hour and thirty-five minutes into our second conversation, it's clear to me that Sal, Sandy, and I are becoming friends. Sandy tells me: "The grandkids know that whatever needs to be fixed, whatever problem they have, to go directly to their grandfather. They know that he'll have the answer, and he does, or he improvises. When he's improvising to make something better, I know it's gonna' be horrible. But, for the few minutes that he's doing it for the children, they love it," she laughs. "Right?"

Sal responds, "That's what counts."

"Yep," she laughs.

I say, "That's good to know. Next time I have a problem I'll know where to go." Sandy and I get a big kick out of this.

Eight minutes into our third recorded interview, this time out to dinner at a Thai restaurant in Tampa, Sal tells me: "I have been interviewed I don't know how many times. And I know that each time I am interviewed something new comes out. Sometimes it's just a memory. And sometimes it's the way people ask questions that it comes out. When people ask questions that I really have to think about, the things that came out would have never came out another way."

I say, "Yeah, that's what's so exciting to me."

Sandy jumps in: "Right, it's probing questions and the way to do a good interview. And you do the same thing," she tells me.

"Thank you," I reply.

Sandy continues, "You talk around it. So this is what we're talking about."

I pick up an earlier thought: "That's why it's so exciting to work with you two. I can see Sal making sense of things newly each time he thinks about it. How do people make sense of any life, let alone a particularly compelling life that speaks to a whole historical issue? Watching you make sense of these issues is to me more interesting than even reading philosophies about how to have meaning in life. I think we can learn

more through talking – to any individual, but particularly to one who's looking to find meaning for himself."

Sandy adds, "And the friendly, safe atmosphere that we feel with you. I think that's more important than anything else."

Sal: "Yeah."

Sandy: "Because other people ask maybe the same questions but it won't be the same response. It won't be the same hearer. They ask it – "

"With a different spirit," Sal says, finishing her thought.

To clarify that I understand, I ask, "Is it an openness, a vulnerability?"

Sal responds, "Yeah, a vulnerability. But also – "

"A disinterest," Sandy inserts, "asking a question but not being interested."

About an hour and a half into our fourth interview, Sal gave me a compliment that has stuck with me. I now mention it when I teach and talk about my research and perspective on interviewing. Sal said, "You know what, you're a good interviewer. You elicit answers. They said it about Barbara Walters."

I respond, "Mm-hmm. Well that's – "

Sal continues, "Maybe you're in the wrong profession?"

This leads me to talk to him about Carolyn Ellis's and my perspective on interviewing and compassionate qualitative methods. Sal is happy that I will teach my students this approach and that, in turn, they will improve in their own ways on what I teach them.

By our last recorded interview, Sal's become like a grandparent-friend-guide to me. I mark this by the fact that he wants to know what I think of his "Sal Special." He asks, "Are you really enjoying it? Tell me the truth."

"The book?" I ask, thinking he is talking about the draft of the book he is having written about his history, which he let me read to get my opinion. He was clear that he only let me and Sandy read it, not even his brother.

"No," he says.

Seeing what he means I say, "Oh, this [the eggs and cauliflower]? For sure! And the book as well. I did enjoy it."

He asks, "How's your, eh, thesis going?"

I tell him, "It is challenging, definitely challenging."

Sal gets a big kick out of this and says, "Listen, anything worthwhile is challenging. That I learned."

"I definitely felt, through listening to you, I understand how much work you've done throughout your life, how hard you work. I grew up having a lot of privileges that you didn't have, that even my parents didn't have. I think it's because of that that my generation takes a little longer to mature."

"Yeah," Sal agrees.

I elaborate: "I'm almost thirty but I'm still, you know, maybe where you were when you were six years old, something like that, in terms of maturity. So this has been a big maturation process. I think that's what I'm learning, the day-in-day-out effort that it takes to do anything worthwhile."

He shares with me: "I had to make a lot of decisions which at the time people might have said were the wrong decisions. But history said that they were the right decisions."

At forty minutes into our last recorded interview I say to Sandy, "Something that's been interesting for me to experience is, since I met Sal, our interactions have been pretty open and emotional."

"Mm-hmm," Sandy nods in agreement.

"Yeah," Sal says, almost as if to say "no question."

"I feel like I've seen a side of you that not many other people have," I tell him.

Sandy says, "Yeah, you have definitely seen a side of Sal that nobody else has." She quickly adds, "I mean I have."

"I hear the stories about how when you say something it happens, and it's the law. But in my experience you seemed like a softy," I tell him with a warm smile. They both laugh – Sandy's is a belly laugh, I imagine because she's never heard anyone refer to Sal as a "softy."

Sal explains to me: "A lot of people, including that class that we were in with your people [Dr. Ellis's graduate class that we visited together], they were asking, 'Well, why is that?' It's because I don't throw out my opinions. And that's what makes something different." I take this as a compliment that perhaps Sal saw our time together as something different, as a place to share openly the wisdom that took him a lifetime to come to terms with.

## IV. Why Do We Tell?

I ask Sal, "So as we move into the future, what's essential that we remember from your experience and from survivors' experiences?"

"Let me tell you something before I can develop that answer," Sal tells me.

"Yeah, sorry," I say, adding, "The questions I don't know the answer to I ask you."

He says, "I, as well as I think any Holocaust survivor that understands, are very, very grateful to you, to Dr. Ellis – people who basically, the way I see it, dedicate your lives to the remembrance of the Holocaust. We never had that. All we had was deniers. So that to me is tremendous. I think if there's one thing that you should strive for – you and Dr. Ellis and everybody else – it's that somehow it shouldn't stop with you. Because at the museum whenever Sandy Mermelstein [tour director for the FHM] introduces me she says to the kids, 'You're very privileged because your kids probably will never be able to hear a survivor.' That's the very truth. So if you can develop a cadre of students who follow you, they're gonna' take your course, read your thesis, take the time to go to the library and hear me. I think that's probably the biggest thing you can accomplish."

"You just made things very clear for me," I say. "One of my big questions is, 'Why remember? Why retell these stories?' We tell these stories to communicate, to connect one person to another, one generation to another." I ask again in a different way: "What do we learn? What do you hope I learn from telling these stories, listening to these stories, struggling with the burden of it?"

"I'm glad you asked me that," Sal says, "because you have to understand that we really weren't cowards. We really were brave to have the will and the strength and the cunning to survive. A coward would have said, 'Here, run me over with the tank.' And a lot of 'em did. To me they're cowards because as long as you live you must have – and this is what I was trying to tell my daughter the other day – the desire to live." Here Sal strikes something deep inside me, something that's taken me thirty years to realize, something I had to learn by studying stories and communication and their limits in human experience.

"The will to live!" I say.

Sal jumps in, "It's not only the will to live. The ambition – the fortuitiveness to do whatever is necessary to do."

I ask, "So would you say that life itself is the meaning? Like when somebody says, 'What's the meaning of life?' Would you say, 'Life itself'?'"

"Life! Life," Sal says. "The artefacts will tell you the appropriation."

I add, "Again, that's kind of a passing-things-on. Stories are a kind of symbolic appropriation, a symbolic lineage."

"Absolutely, absolutely," Sal says.

"This is blowing my mind," I say.

"Hope it doesn't do it here," he jokes.

So what, you might be asking, is the breakthrough in these simple words? It's a breakthrough that in some senses Viktor Frankl and many in the field of communication overlook.[7] It is not "man's search for meaning." It's the will to *experience and express life itself*. The experience of life, this is a "beyond" that is larger than the human symbolic capacity and from which our stories emerge. Sharing experience is the messy, interconnected, relational, and always incomplete process – as Leon and Greenspan note – of "making a story" of what is "not a story."[8] Sitting in awe and wonder at the vastness of life itself, magnified beautifully and complexly in an individual life story, is a big part of what my time with Sal was about – it's a big part of the wisdom I take from this experience. But that was not all.

Through telling and retelling his story, Sal was forced to reflect on his own prejudices – namely, his hatred of Polish people. Both he and Sandy showed that, through thinking about and telling his story, Sal had indeed transformed his thinking. Sal explained to me: "That was a definite hatred you could say [i.e., Sal's feeling towards the Sokols as a young man]. I hated the Polish people in general because my immediate family died at the hands of Polish people not the Germans. So I had that for the longest time. As part of telling I guess I realized that people are people. You can't blame a whole population for what some bad guys did. So I went, and I'm still going, through that."

Sandy says, "Sal has come to the realization of not to generalize."

"Because you have to take the example," he interjects.

"Right," she says.

I'll end this section with one final example of why we are telling this particular story. It comes from what Sandy thought would make a good title for Sal's book: "I Don't Have a Number, I Have a Story."

Sal says, "With all the kids asking about my number."

I add, "I think that that is a powerful title because, for a long time, we defined a Holocaust survivor as someone who's in a camp, someone with a number, and other people were disavowed as survivors."

"Right," Sandy says. "There're not real survivors."

Sal explains, "Everybody asks, 'What camp were you in?'"

"People don't understand that a survivor is not just a camp survivor," Sandy says.

## Beginning (to "Really" Listen to Sal) at the End[9]

Sandy opens the door and I follow her into Sal's bright hospital room, illuminated with natural light pouring in from the large window on the right side of Sal's bed. Robyn, Sal's daughter, and Andrew, his son, are in the room. We briefly exchange quiet introductions. Robyn, a paediatric physician, sees me notice that the permanently affixed crucifix in the upper right corner of the room is covered with a sheet. She informs me, "The crucifix is a standard fixture in most rooms at St. Joseph's. They attach them so people can't take them home." We both smile. Sal's act of resistance makes me happy, yet my eyes fill with tears.

"Hey, buddy. How are you?" I say to Sal, still standing next to Robyn.

"Chris, Chris, you're half the man you were since I saw you," Sal jokes, referring to my thinness.

"Oh, no, you're just used to seeing me dressed up. I look bigger in formal clothes," I say.

"Okay," he says, moving on. "So nice to see you. Come, sit." He motions with his left hand to the two chairs on the left side of the bed. Robyn allows me to sit closest to Sal for the moment and takes the seat to the left of me, and I place my hand on Sal's forearm. Andrew sits in the corner behind us. Sandy is on the other side of the bed holding a Styrofoam cup filled with water that has a straw sticking out, ready whenever Sal wants a sip.

Sal's hair is still thick and curly, despite nearly a year of aggressive chemo. *Stubborn and strong, just like Sal*, I think. Except it's no longer dark grey. The front is snow white and the back light grey. His skin is ashen and yellow. Bathed in the natural light, Sal's eyes glow a pale and bright blue-green. His unnatural thinness exaggerates his enormous hands, which still look powerful – like I'm used to seeing the rest of him. Sal's booming voice is quiet today but still low, slow, and full of character and rasp. When he is hit periodically by acute pain, he simply closes his eyes for a few seconds, breathes, and continues on, not letting it interrupt his train of thought. "Sal, I can see that you're in pain, and still you're so generous with your conversation," I tell him.

"This is more important," he responds. "*Listen*." Sal looks me in the eyes: "Chris, I will be at peace if I feel one person has *really listened*, has *really tried to understand*. You have."

Chills race through my body as I am overwhelmed and honoured. For a moment I'm speechless, break my intense focus on Sal, and notice Sandy and Robyn smiling at me reassuringly. I finally manage, "Sal, that

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is a lot of responsibility, and I'm humbled." I take a breath and continue, "I can tell you that, through listening and re-listening to our conversations, I finally feel like I'm beginning to listen to what you're saying. This is the main theme in all our conversations. They always come back to our struggle to listen and to tell."

"Yes," Sal whispers.

"I imagine that you must feel profound satisfaction, having shared your story with so many," I add. "I think you've changed many lives. You've changed mine. Sal, you've helped me to mature, to become a man."

"*Yes*, Chris. This is *it*. Don't confuse it. Life, even after the Holocaust, even with all I've seen, even now, is about *learning to love one another and love ourselves* – to learn to *really listen to each other*."

"I'll do my best to pass this message on," I tell him.

"I know you will. I have the highest hopes for you."

Just then more people arrive to visit Sal – a few friends, one also a Holocaust survivor, and two rabbis. The energy in the room shifts to something less intimate and busier, the work of hellos. I stand up, move to the back, and try my best to get out of the way.

Tears that have been welling up all this time fall freely. I'm left looking down in silence. When I look up I can see Sal is agitated with all the people in the room. Sandy gives me a look that I can't quite make out, a half smile and a sigh, which I interpret as meaning that my presence is still welcome. Everyone in the room is talking to one another at once and the volume is getting louder. I see Sandy lean in to Sal as he says, "Tell everyone to leave."

Sandy announces confidently and calmly: "Okay everyone, thank you for coming. Sal is tired and needs some rest." We all file out of the room. I take a moment to reflect in the hallway. Almost immediately the door to Sal's room opens and Sandy peeks out. "Oh, good, you're still here," she says in a chipper voice. "Sal wanted the others to leave so he could talk more with you," she adds with her infectious laughter. I smile and stick around for the next two hours talking with Sal, Sandy, Robyn, and Andrew, until it's time for some of Sal's treatments.

Two days later I visit again. But, just minutes before I arrive, Sal is moved to the Intensive Care Unit. I can't see him, so I stick around and talk with Sandy, family, and friends in the waiting room. After Sandy and Robyn are called back into the ICU, I say goodbye to Sal and Sandy's friends. Later that evening, I get a call from a family friend telling me that Sal waited for his brother to arrive before he died.

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Two days later, I attend Sal's funeral, held graveside at Gan Shalom Cemetery in Lutz. More than a hundred family, friends, and synagogue and community members are in attendance. It is a traditional, conservative Jewish funeral in which we all have a hand filling in the grave, a ritual I experience as profound. Sal's rabbi comments that he considered himself a conservative Jew but that he was his own kind of conservative, that he had a unique moral compass. He is buried between two old oaks on a hot and windy day.

## Epilogue

**Commitment to sharing authority is a beginning, not a destination.**

– Michael Frisch[10]

The goal of this piece is to share, in an intimate way, some of the "meat" of the process of "digging" through the "big kettle of soup" of my time with Sal. I refrain from taking a critical stance on our relationship and the moments I tell here because, for this particular chapter, that would take away from what our voices have to say. Instead, I choose to see the Wainbergs as intellectual authorities and to maximize the space I give to Sal's and Sandy's voices and our relationship. I am not advocating that researchers ought to get involved with our participants in the way that I became involved with Sal and Sandy. Rather, we should abandon simple notions of the boundaries of research with individuals and instead listen closely to our instincts and to those with whom we work in order to collaboratively negotiate – in always-ongoing ways – the most compassionate and appropriate ways to go about our work together.

Through talking with Sal and Sandy and digging through our conversations, it becomes ever clearer how much of this story is omitted and remains silent and untold: for Sal, there are mysteries he never found out about in his life; for Sandy, as well as she knew and loved Sal, parts of him remain a question mark; and for me, as an ethnographer,[11] I feel a near-crippling sense of not being able to do justice, in this or any representation, to the man I knew. To deal with this dilemma, in Robert Coles' words, I "err on the side of each person's particularity,"[12] attempting to show the compassionate "spirit" of this work. Instead of working from a priori theory or traditional methods of "researching" survivors, I, inspired by Greenspan,[13] respond to Sal and Sandy as unique individuals in order to hear more of what it is they have to tell. In struggling

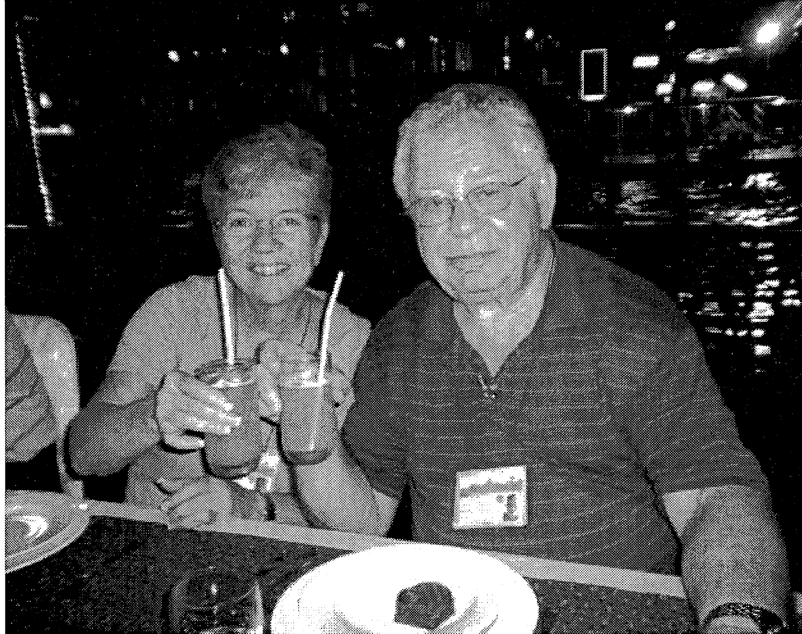

FIGURE 7.1 Sal and Sandy Wainberg on their 2008 trip to Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. *Photograph courtesy of Sandy Wainberg.*

to represent Sal meaningfully, I have crafted two hundred pages of conversational dialogue, a tiny fraction of which is included here. I privilege the voices of Sal and Sandy, even while knowing more is absent than shared. And I write about our relationship with tenderness and love, as I would if I were telling the story of a family member.[14]

The core of my ethic is inspired by Sal's, as well as Greenspan's and Agi's, "moral of the story"[15] – engaging compassionately with survivors of mass atrocities is a significant scholarly justification, one that tests the limits of oral history and responds to the vastness, complexity, and relational ethics inherent in *coming to terms with* and sharing any life.[16] This piece, therefore, is an attempt to encourage myself and others to listen with more heart to the individual paradoxes of life and death,[17] love and loss, lost and found that emerge from life histories, especially the life histories of Holocaust survivors at the end of life. Beyond that, this chapter is a step towards sharing with others the wisdom cultivated through listening with a friend who had a lifetime of experience coming to terms with life in the wake of the Holocaust.

## Notes

This chapter is dedicated to my friends Sal and Sandy Wainberg. I cannot express the depth of my gratitude for their open willingness to share their experiences and time with me. I also must acknowledge Carolyn Ellis for the central role she plays in this work and thank her for her guidance and compassion in helping me realize it. In addition, I thank Steven High and Henry Greenspan for their close readings and sage advice on revisions as well as for their encouragement to show more of Sal's voice and the "in-between" of this story. Last, this chapter is dedicated to the lost lives and stories of the Holocaust universe and those dedicated to sharing as much as they can, as uniquely as they can, before it's too late.

1 For those interested in the formal oral history of Salomon Wainberg, you can learn more from his interviews with the Shoah Foundation Institute (1995) and the Florida Holocaust Museum/University of South Florida Libraries (FHM) (2010). His FHM interview can be found at http://guides.lib.usf.edu/ohpi#doi=F60-00021.

2 My dissertation research consists of three years of casual audio-recorded ethnographic interviews with three Holocaust survivors and their closest family: Salomon "Sal" and Sandra "Sandy" Wainberg, Manuel Goldberg and his wife Rachel Rivlin, and Sonia "Sala" Wasserberger. I focus only on my work with Sal and Sandy in this chapter.

3 Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony*, 2nd ed. (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2010); Henry Greenspan and Sidney Bolkosky, "When Is an Interview an Interview? Notes from Listening to Holocaust Survivors," *Poetics Today* 27, 2 (2006): 431–49; Steven High, "Sharing Authority: An Introduction," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43, 1 (2009): 21–34; Jerry Rawicki and Carolyn Ellis, "Lechem Hara (Bad Bread), Lechem Tov (Good Bread): Survival and Sacrifice During the Holocaust," *Qualitative Inquiry* 11, 2 (2011):155–57; Agi Rubin and Henry Greenspan, *Reflections: Auschwitz, Memory, and a Life Recreated* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2006); Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, "Only Human: A Reflection on the Ethical and Methodological Challenges of Working with 'Difficult' Stories," *Oral History Review* 37, 2 (2010): 191–214; Montreal Life Stories Project at http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca/.

4 Critically reflexive approaches to practices of history and oral history are important, and this anthology contains powerful examples of this tradition. So, too, is reflecting on the ethics of "compassion" in academic work with human beings. For reasons of space and in order to offer what I sense is the spirit of Sal's and my conversations, however, I risk telling a raw, vulnerable story of what erring on the side of forming personal, boundary-blurring, family-like relationships with those with whom we work can create. I explain more why I do this in the conclusion.

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5 High, "Sharing Authority," 15.

6 Omer Bar Tov, "Spielberg's Oskar: Hollywood Tries Evil," in *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*, ed. Yosefa Loshitzky, 41–60 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

7 Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 60th anniversary ed. (New York: Pocket Books).

8 Greenspan, *On Listening*, 3–4, 20. I am thankful to Henry Greenspan for bringing back to my awareness the complex, relational process of his and Leon's formulation of "making a story." He details this process and the different, relational paradigm it represents on page 234.

9 The story here is constructed based on detailed ethnographic field notes I took immediately after leaving the hospital. I do my best to represent, as accurately as possible, the words and actions of the characters and situation.

10 Michael Frisch, "Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process," *Oral History Review* 30, 1 (2003): 112. Also cited by High, "Sharing Authority," 12 and by Sheftel and Zembrzycki, "Only Human," 198.

11 Lyall Crawford, "Personal Ethnography," *Communication Monographs* 63, 2 (1996): 158–70.

12 Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin), 27. I cite Coles' words with deep gratitude to Arthur Bochner, who assigned this book in his narrative theory doctoral seminar and whose work shows the value of personal stories.

13 Greenspan, *On Listening*.

14 Chris Patti, "Split Shadows: Myths of a Lost Father and Son," *Qualitative Inquiry* 18, 2 (2012): 53–61.

15 Ibid., 211. Here, I refer to Greenspan's humane justification to listen to survivors for the purpose of listening and Agi's understanding of compassion.

16 Carolyn Ellis, "Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research with Intimate Others," *Qualitative Inquiry* 13, 1 (2007): 3–29.

17 Ibid., 41–73.