

# A Journey to the Holocaust and Back: Searching for Facts, Finding Emotions



BY MEL LAYTNER

When I spotted my father's signature on the Auschwitz form, I knew I had a story.

When I found the SS report confirming his unlikely tale of foiled escape, forged ID cards, British POWs and the Polish underground, I figured I had a book.

I had been a reporter for 20 years. It quickly became clear that whatever I wrote would be nonfiction — not an “inspired by” or “based on” novel, or a well-researched historical fiction. Because even with good historical fiction, you never know where history leaves off and fiction begins. The rare material I had uncovered was too important for those kinds of doubts.

Ironically, this did begin as a piece of fiction — a short story about Bill Ball, a British POW. He and my father were slave laborers at a refinery in Germany. Under the Geneva Convention, POWs could write postcards home. Bill Ball used this privilege to send a postcard to my father's family in Brooklyn. Because of censorship, my father said it could only say something like, “Doing as

well as can be expected. My mate Joe is still with me.”

The piece would have to be fictionalized because confirming the facts was impossible. All I needed was some context, a bit of detail and color about time and place ...

Instead, I spent the next several years following a Nazi paper trail through musty archives and town halls in Europe, Israel, and the United States. The documents confirmed some of Josef ‘Dolek’ Lajtner's more unlikely stories and tracked his life from home to ghettos, slave labor, concentration camps, death marches, and more.

At “Author Chats” or “Book Forums,” I use PowerPoint to show a few of the documents and highlight how minor details provide new leads. I also point out how the documents themselves mirror the metathesis of Nazi policy from ethnic cleansing to mass murder.

I talk, a lot, about the research, how I included only stories corroborated by at least two independent sources: multiple eyewitnesses, documents, or some combination of the two. Aside from my

memories of my father's stories, everything within quotation marks is from a document, personal interview, diary, letter, or recorded testimonial.

Yet the first question I'm invariably asked is not about the journalism, but about feelings. As in, how did you feel when you learned about your father being tortured? Or, what were you feeling as you peeled away the layers of truth behind your father's stories?

I'd like to say I had always anticipated these kinds of reactions. But that would be untrue.

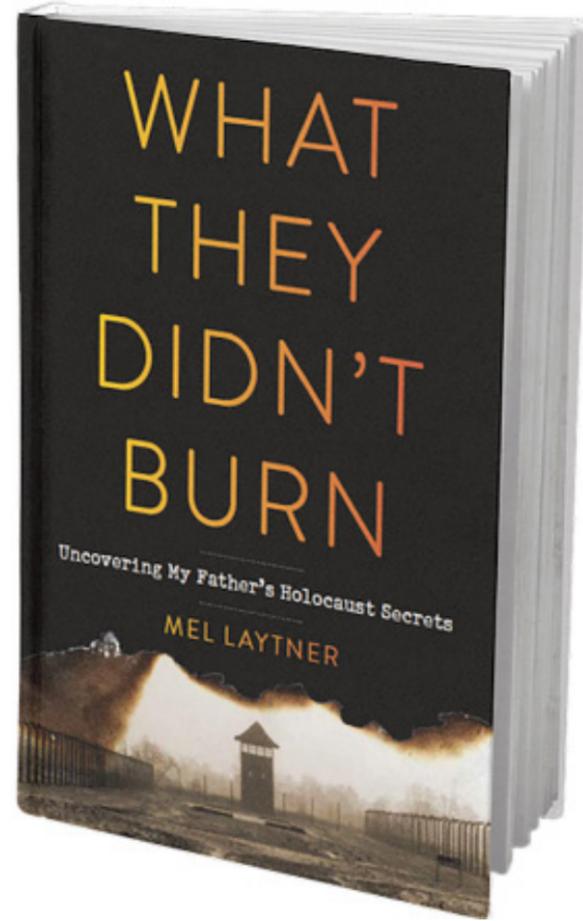
To be clear, What They Didn't Burn was always envisioned as a twinned narrative — a single concentration camp inmate's story of survival as corroborated by the Nazis themselves, and a “detective story” that showed the ups and downs of investigative journalism. I would be part of the story, but about the process, not the personal.

At writers' workshops, I airily dismissed suggestions that I would have to explore my innermost motives and feelings about my father, who died in 1985. Writing how I felt was simply not what reporters did; the story would tell itself.

Then it came time to find an agent. I passed around drafts of my pitch letter to friends and former colleagues soliciting their advice. One acquaintance, a member of the Silurians who had published his own family memoir, said the “depth” (read: obsession) of my years-long research suggested “something else is going on” and that my pitch letter ignored it.

I protested that my project required no such heavy lifting, that it was essentially an exercise in investigative journalism 101. I had uncovered startling documents, interviewed witnesses, and corroborated facts.

Once I started writing, I gradually realized everybody was right

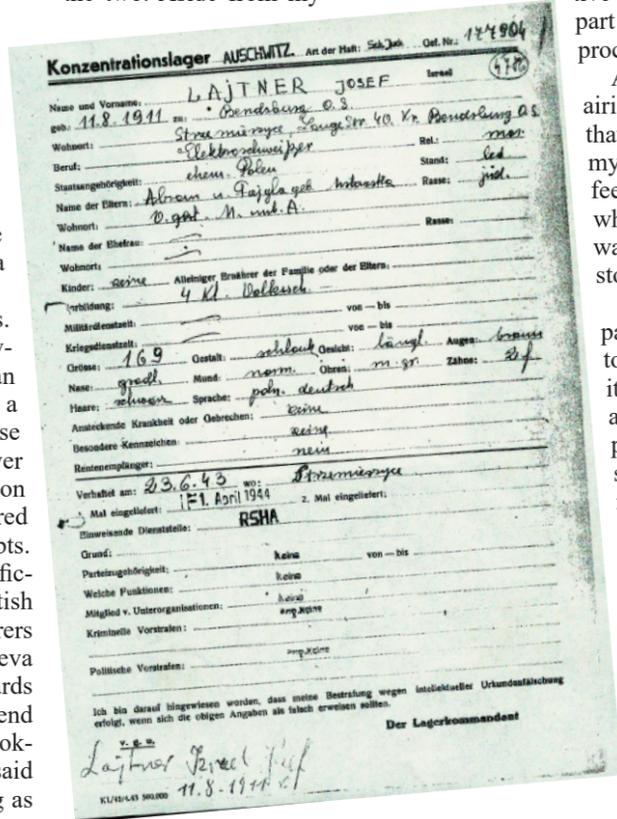


and I was wrong. To be compelling (and marketable), the book would have to be more than, as the libel lawyers say, a fair and true report. Personal motives matter. Exploring them publicly was hard.

If the reader did not empathize with the humanity of the characters, the book would be a failure. If the reader came away skeptical of the facts and truths presented, the book would also be a failure.

Journalism is (or should be) dispassionate and corroborative. Memoir is (or should be) warm and personal. The back cover blurb hopefully captures this dilemma: “What if you uncovered a Nazi paper trail that revealed your father to be a man very different from the quiet, introspective dad you knew ... or thought you knew?”

It took a couple of years and too many drafts to meld the two genres together into what I've come to call an investigative memoir.



## Ken Auletta on How He Unraveled the Harvey Weinstein Saga

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claimed Farrow did not have the ingredients for the story. But Ken knew better. “I've got three women on camera by name accusing Harvey of sexually abusing them,” Auletta quoted Ronan as telling him. “I've got five women on camera but shielding their identity. I've got the Italian model who claimed Harvey grabbed her breasts in 2015. I've got the audio tape of him acknowledging or admitting he had done that. I said, ‘My God, you've broken the story.’” And he had. Ken took Ronan in hand in August, brought him to Remnick and, in October, The New Yorker ran the story. The New York Times ran their own version. All hell broke loose.

Ken never got to the bottom of just why NBC could pull such a ham-handed maneuver and think they could get away with killing Ronan's work. But Auletta has several hypotheses, ranging from Oppenheim's desire to sell a script someday to Harvey and break into motion pictures, to the desperate need of NBC's parent Universal Studios to preserve its relations with Miramax. All relate back to the extraordinary layers of protection that only Ronan and The Times managed to break through.

“Both were brilliant pieces of work and particularly brilliant because it is so hard

to get women to feel comfortable enough and not fearful enough to speak out and acknowledge what had been done to them,” Auletta explained.

So how did they do it? “One of the strategies they followed, which was particularly brilliant, get them in a group to talk, don't do it one-on-one. Get them to feel the comfort of peers who had the same awful experience.”

So, what's left for Ken to explore, and at great length, in what is really a monumental work? “There were still many questions that I

thought needed answers: what made Harvey the monster he became” and how did he use this sense of power he had found. “Something happened in his childhood or whatever made him what he was.”

Auletta went back to Harvey's youth in Queens and Harvey's mother. “Miriam Weinstein was a very dominant person in that house,” Ken said. “She ruled the household. His friends played poker every weekend at a different friend's house but would never play poker at Harvey's. I said, ‘why is that?’ Be-

cause Miriam Weinstein would yell too much. ‘Harvey, you're too fat...Harvey, stop doing this...Harvey, what are you doing?’ She was constantly putting down Harvey.”

But there was still Harvey the genius film maker who understood that a great film, an Academy Award film, begins with the script. And speaking of the Oscars, Ken pointed out, “The only individual who has been called out and recognized from the stage more than Harvey is Steven Spielberg.” Until he wasn't.

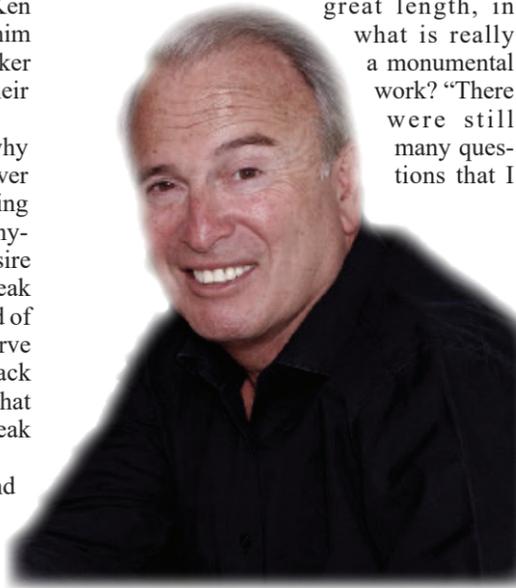
### Excerpt from ‘Hollywood Ending’

“Harvey Weinstein was a pro at projecting power. The press was a key component of that power. Harvey claimed as social friends Rupert Murdoch, Vogue editor Anna Wintour, Vanity Fair editor Graydon Carter, New York Daily News publisher Mort Zuckerman, CBS CEO Les Moonves, NBC CEO Jeff Zucker, and Saturday Night Live producer Lorne Michaels. “There was a sense that he controlled the press, that he knew powerful people,” said Joseph Ravitch, a well-connected Goldman Sachs investment banker who would work closely with the Weinsteins, both before and

after cofounding the Raine Group in 2009, a media investment advisory firm. Harvey did not hesitate to go over the heads of reporters who wrote about him. When David Carr was profiling him for New York magazine, Harvey repeatedly contacted executives at Primedia, the magazine's then owner, and Caroline Miller, the editor, blustering and cajoling them to tone the piece down, treating this and other profiles as a Miramax campaign he was critiquing rather than a journalistic profile he was subject to.

Harvey also aggressively courted gossip

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KEN AULETTA

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