

Resilience: One Family's History The Skills and Tools for Organizing Large Amounts of Discordant Information Into a Cohesive Story

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Larry Lynam of the AMWA Florida Chapter graciously invited me to speak last year at one of the monthly First Thursday virtual networking meetings the chapter regularly organizes. Our initial focus was on how I researched and wrote my memoir, *Resilience: One Family's Story*, which was published in October 2019.¹ Following my presentation, we had a lively discussion on the tools I used to organize the large amount of information generated from my research to write the memoir. As the processes and tools I used in writing the memoir are equally valuable in my medical writing, I was prompted to write this article to share them with the wider AMWA membership.

The memoir is the story of my family, beginning with village life circa 1910 to 1920 in rural Hungary, their experiences throughout the Holocaust, and their journey toward rebuilding their lives in a new country that was not entirely welcoming. Unlike a typical biography, my book is a collection of biographies of different family members. Sources included 9 surviving family members, 8 of their children, and oral history interviews that were acquired over many years. I learned what a challenge it was to weave those overlapping stories together into a coherent and compelling whole and had to develop a new skill set, which was narrative writing.

The details I gleaned felt like an overwhelming amount of material to organize—from the interviews with many of the recounted paths and experiences during the war being quite different, to research on the Jewish culture and traditions of Eastern European villages, to historical details of the Holocaust. Additionally, I searched for source documents belonging to each member of the family in order to more fully understand their lives and put events into context, which was very time-consuming and challenging.

My initial foray into writing the biography did not go well. I thought I would write a chapter for each family member, telling their stories chronologically. I began with my maternal aunt. When I reached the time in her story when she was liberated from the concentration camps and became engaged to my father's brother, I realized that there was no way that the

chronological format would work, as I hadn't introduced him earlier! It was back to the drawing board for me, with reading more memoirs and biographies. *Fragments of Isabella* by Isabella Leitner² resonated with me as the most powerful memoir I had read, and it provided me a fresh approach on how to write my family's story.

I also hired experienced writers to coach me. This was perhaps the smartest decision I made. I normally write medical explainers or perspectives and was inexperienced in writing this sort of vivid, descriptive narrative usually found in novels/books. Prompted by my first writing coach, I looked back at the prewar photos we were so fortunate to have and worked to describe every detail graphically. I repeatedly reinterviewed those characters in my book who were still alive to elicit memories and descriptions of their households, scents of cooking and baking, textures and colors, in order to paint a vivid picture of rural village life. My second writing coach also radically changed my perspective. I had been studiously trying to remain an objective observer narrating my family's experiences. My coach, however, was adamant that "I" was what was missing from the story and that I needed to write about my relationships: those with my aunts and uncles as well as my perspectives and reactions to family secrets I learned during the interviews and writing.

Through this work, I was able to break through my writer's block. I proceeded to write my recollections and my family's experiences as a series of vignettes and not worry about connecting them all until later. In addition, I also used 2 important tools. The first tool was a detailed timeline noting not only what happened (births, marriages, deaths, concentration camps, immigration, etc.) but also how old each individual was at the time. A separate line for each person made identifying relationships easier. This proved invaluable in helping me understand some of the family dynamics, which were essential in fleshing out the characters and story development. I had looked at superimposing our events on historic timelines from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum but decided that was needlessly cumbersome and added little.

The second tool was using software programs to help me organize my family's story (Table). I initially just transcribed audio tapes; however, I quickly changed to using the software Transana when transcribing my oral history interviews. Transana is a program to help users manage and analyze large collections of media data. I preferred using Transana to using a simple tape recording because it allowed me to make a searchable database of video clips based on the individuals and key words. I particularly liked that I could annotate emotions and nonverbal clues seen in the videos in the transcriptions and better visualize clips I might want to highlight in my book. I also inserted time stamps for both reference points because my initial aspiration was to make a short video for Holocaust

education. I did not find iMovie to be as readily searchable for clips of specific topics as Transana was. If writing about heated exchanges at medical conferences or debates for instance, Transana might be a useful software platform because one can better analyze gestures and nonverbals.

Zotero was also a useful adjunct to my research. For *Resilience*, I used it to organize genealogic details and track source documents for each person. I had tried Evernote but found it harder to organize, as it felt like a large junk pile. I also found Zotero easier to use than Endnote and liked that it was free and open-source. I also use Zotero extensively in my medical writing (Figure 1). I find it helpful for annotating references, searching by keywords, and collecting small facts that I can

Table. Useful Organizational Software Tools for Medical Writers

Software Tool	Zotero	Scrivener	Transana
Best Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can import articles and bibliography information while browsing. • Searchable for facts and random bites of information that an author may want to use repeatedly in articles. • Can sort bibliographies into collections and tag with keywords. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For writing and rewriting. • For writing that requires many citations or referring to source documents. • Can import articles without bibliography data. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For analysis: can add codes and make a database of video clips for analysis. • Can insert timestamps into transcript.
Cost	Free	30-day free trial; \$49	\$150
Ease of Use	Easy	Moderate	Difficult
Available Aids	Tutorial	Tutorial and videos	Tutorial and demonstrations
Website	https://www.zotero.org/	https://www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener/overview	https://www.transana.com/products/transana-basic/

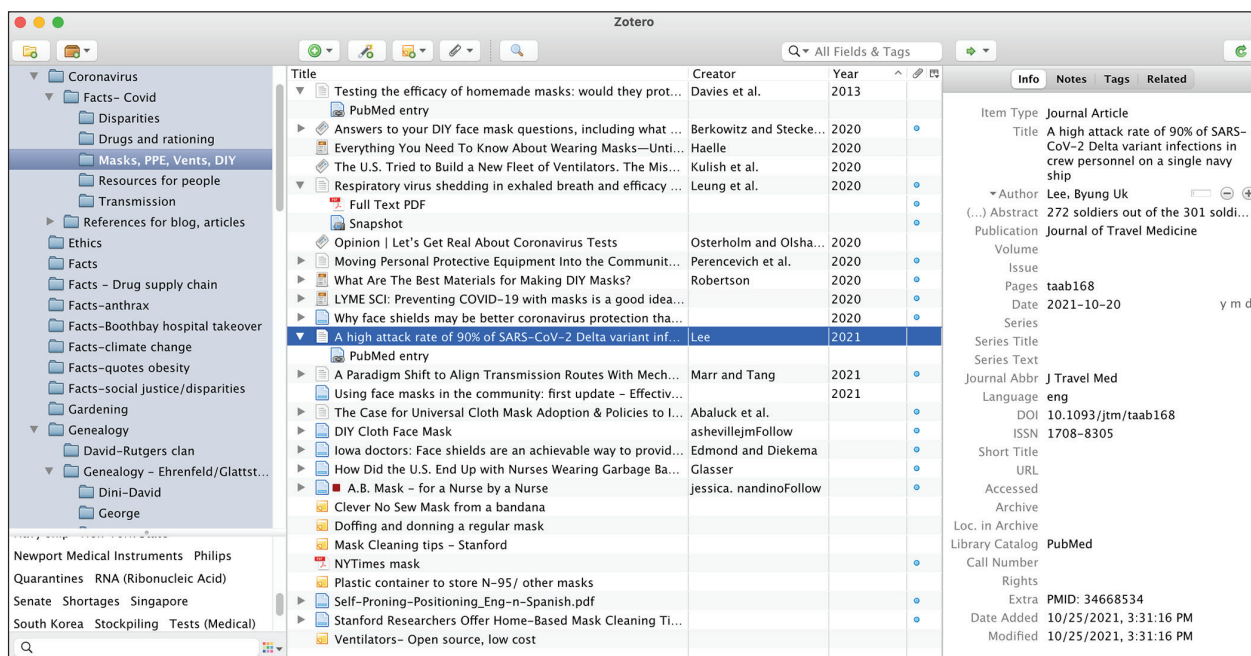


Figure 1. Screenshot of a Zotero file. On the left is the master folder, with nested folders and subfolders within it. Here, parts of my coronavirus and genealogy folders are shown, with keywords below. In the center are the individual articles and notes in a folder, downloaded via a Chrome extension. On the right is bibliographic data for the selected article. This can be exported into one's writing project.

readily use in a variety of medical articles (eg, details about specific infections that won't change a great deal over time).

Scrivener was a third software program that proved invaluable in organizing my information and drafts. First, I made a folder for each of the major family members (“characters”). Within each, I had subfolders for the following categories: childhood, prelude to war, the war years, liberation, coming to America, and later years. As I transcribed each interview tape (including timestamps), I dropped passages into the appropriate subfolder (Figure 2). Scrivener also made it so easy to annotate each bit of information as to its source. This was sometimes handy when people’s memories diverged, but I felt it critical to have my sources verifiable in case I was ever challenged by any Holocaust deniers. My book was received with excellent editorial reviews and was adopted as a “First Year Read” by one college for its incoming students. I’m satisfied that I met my initial goal—my promise to my family that their stories would not be forgotten. I would still like to continue educating individuals about “othering,” teaching tolerance, and about the Holocaust—messages that remain necessary now. The task of writing such a complex biography was more difficult than I had anticipated. It was a larger-than-expected undertaking because of the vast amount of details and

information that had to be organized and annotated, gleaned from many hours of interviews.

In my medical writing, I have to gather and review scientific publications and news reports, dissect out and analyze the details, and then reframe the story for a specific type of audience. Two of the tools that I used in writing this biography—Zotero and Scrivener—have also served me well for years in my medical writing. They are very adaptable for an individual writer’s needs as to the level of detail one wishes to organize, and Scrivener includes several formats to accommodate different writing styles. They have both helped me organize my writing and ensure the accuracy of its content. Scrivener has also helped me be more efficient in my writing. I hope you will find the same to be true for you.

Author declaration and disclosures: *The author notes no commercial associations that may pose a conflict of interest in relation to this article.*

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References

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2. Leitner, Isabella. *Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz*. Ty Crowell, Co; 1978.

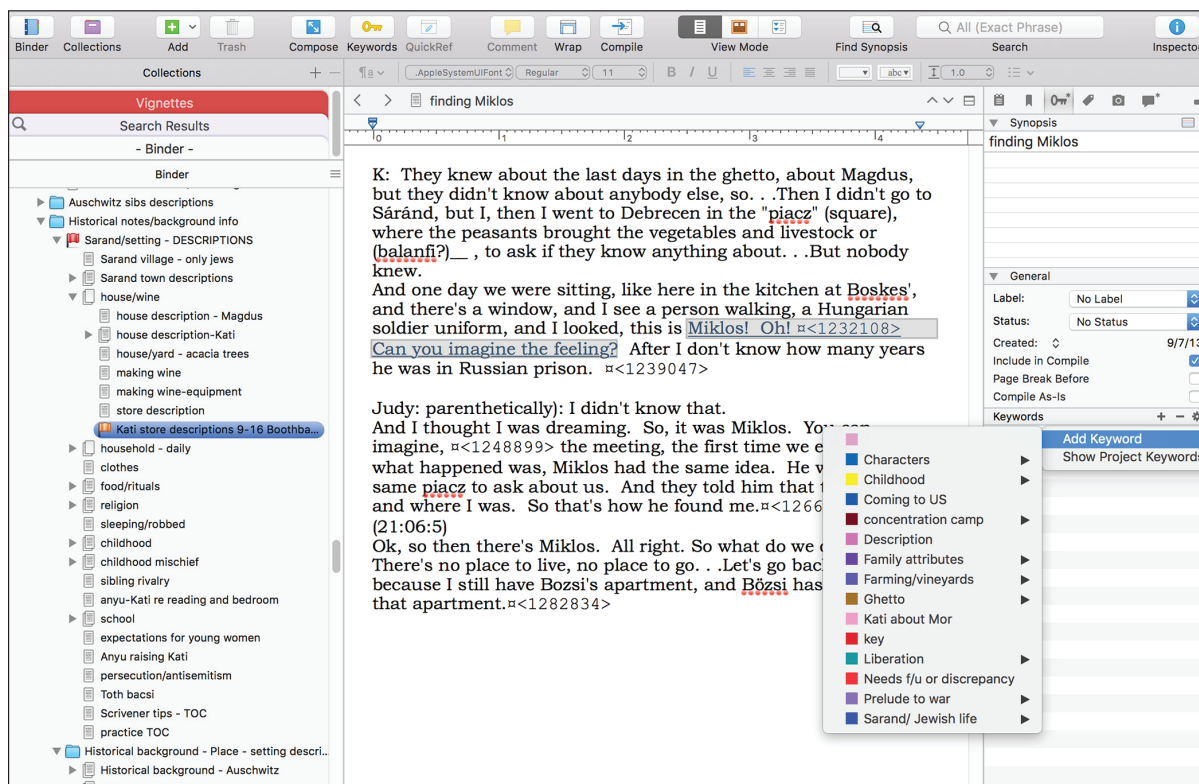


Figure 2. Screenshot of a Scrivener note. On the left, the Binder is the equivalent of a table of contents with nested folders. This shows some of the files for the historical background portion of the book. There were similar folders for each person and other major topics. In the center is a sample transcript relating to my aunt learning that her brother, Miklos, was still alive. The numbers in brackets refer to the Transana timestamps. The pop-out box in the center shows the subfolders I created within each family member’s main folder, demonstrating the depth of organization that Scrivener provides. On the right the possibility of adding keywords is illustrated, among other options.