

Author Katrina Shawver on Writing, Poland, and Why Credibility is Critical



Please introduce yourself and your books.

I identify as a writer, public speaker, history geek, and life-long fan of public libraries. I call Phoenix, Arizona home, as I have for most of my life. By far, my

biggest accomplishment has been publishing the nonfiction biography, *HENRY: A Polish Swimmer's True Story of Friendship from Auschwitz to America* (Köehler Books, November 2017.)

HENRY is the incredible true story that is both a witness to the Holocaust through Polish eyes and the story of how Henry Zguda, a Polish (Catholic) competitive swimmer, survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps by his wits, humor, luck, and friends. At times humorous, always gut-honest, this account fills a huge gap in historical accounts of Poles during World War II.

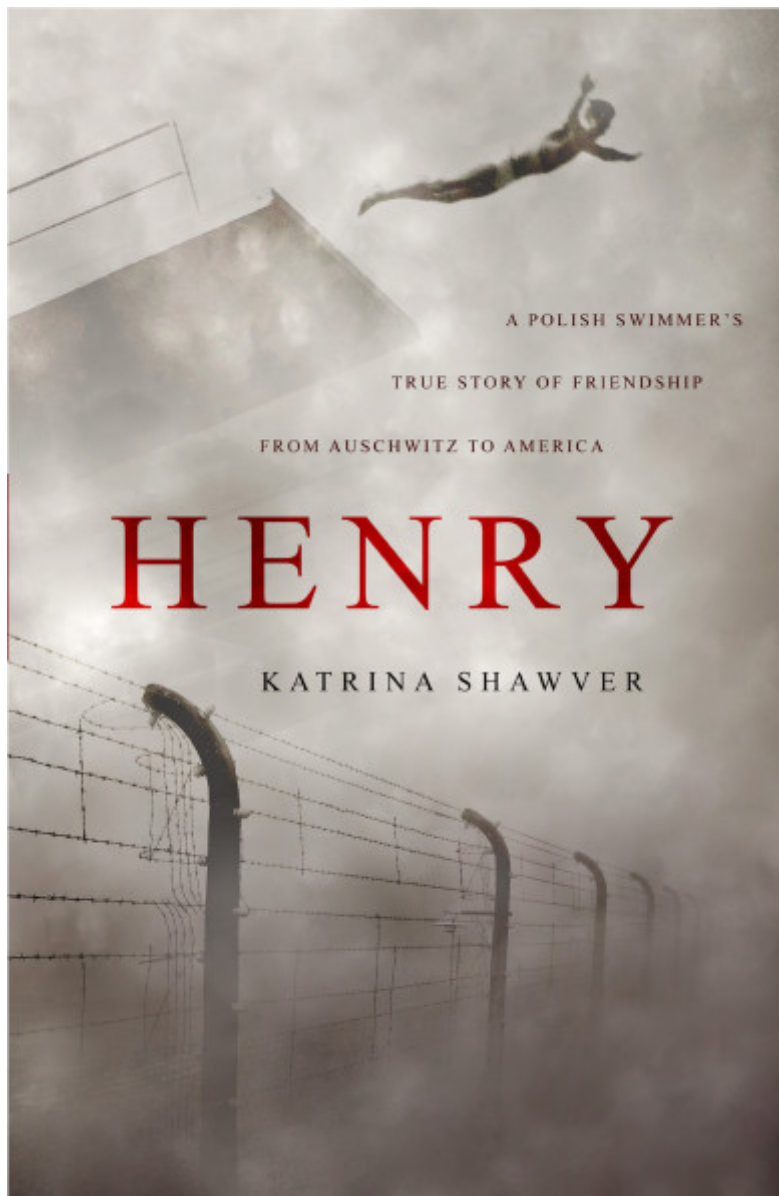
How Did You Become a Writer and Author?

My career life, and unexpected path to published author, took an indirect route with many stops along the way.

My accidental writing career began in 1997 after I wrote a letter to the editor of the *Arizona Republic* in Phoenix AZ ... and they invited me to write for them. My columns then appeared for eleven years until the newspaper downsized.

The direction of my life changed when I met Henry Zguda in 2002 through a random referral. This eighty-five-year-old Polish gentleman had survived Auschwitz and Buchenwald as a Catholic political prisoner during World War II. He lived very close to my home. After penning only one column, I somewhat impulsively offered to write his story when I realized he had no siblings, no children, and therefore no one else offering to preserve his story. Even though I had three school-age children, a full-time job, and an aging parent, we began weekly interviews right away. How many years does an eighty-five-year-old still have?

I sensed from the very beginning his story was unique, significant, and one I would never find again. It took fifteen years from start to publication, including substantial research of World War II, Poland, Auschwitz, and the Holocaust. I am not Polish, Jewish, or had any family ties to Henry. Because I needed to know the history for the context and sense of place, I incorporated a lot of the history I learned into the book.



Why Poland and Why Does History Matter?

History and human stories, especially of people who overcame incredible odds to survive like Henry Zguda, are part of the social fabric that connect us as a society. His story called to me on many levels. He was from Kraków, and much of the story takes place in Poland. The more I learned about Poland and how it has been treated historically, the more I realized his story represented millions of Poles whose stories have gone untold and received little historical credit. The unfairness instilled in me the certainty that this story had to be told in my lifetime before something happened to me.

Poland played a critical role during World War II, and no country suffered more. When I tell most people that Henry was not Jewish but was in Auschwitz they react with disbelief. Yet, six million Poles died, three million of whom were Jewish, and three million were ethnic Poles. If I mention that more than one million Poles, primarily young girls and women were sent to Germany as forced labor, they look equally surprised. In September 1939 Poland was invaded by and split in two by both Germany and Russia, her historical enemies for centuries. Both were merciless towards Polish citizens, determined to erase Poland and Polish culture. Yet the history of the Holocaust focuses entirely on the crimes of the Nazis, not the crimes of the Russians and communists. Understanding the more complete history of any country helps explain historical tensions and current political attitudes.

What are some of the biggest mistakes an author can make in a book?

So many writers rush to publish before they are ready. Just because your family and friends think the story is great, and your best friend proofread it, does not mean a book is competitive or ready to go to market.

The first requirement for any author is to write a really good book. That may seem obvious, but too many skip important steps. A polished book needs to have been reviewed by beta readers, edited professionally, and formatted to industry standards. The cover must be professionally designed and stand out on a bookshelf and in a small thumbnail online. The book needs to grab the reader from the very first sentence.

Marketing needs to begin long before publication and continues in perpetuity. A wise author plans for it with advance reviews, a polished website, and advance planning for a fantastic book launch. Any author who doesn't understand the definition and critical importance of "platform" will never sell a lot of books, regardless of the quality of writing. There is a reason why ninety-five percent of self-published authors rarely sell more than 250 copies of their book. In a time when nearly a million books are published each year, a book has to be truly exceptional to garner and hold attention.

Why is Credibility so Important to You?

Every author needs to establish credibility with readers. Failure to fact-check, verify spelling, or to assume indicates sloppiness. Fiction needs to accurately reference real places. The burden of proof and accuracy in nonfiction is especially non-negotiable, just as when I wrote for the newspaper. In my case, I began with almost no knowledge of Poland, Polish history, or the details and intricacies of what it meant to be a survivor of a concentration camp, especially from the perspective of prisoners outside the category of Jewish. It took years of reading similar memoirs, researching archives, and even travel to Poland to verify information.

I also had the burden of proof to verify the veracity and accuracy of one man's memories and history from sixty years ago. Yet the trail of evidence never ended, and the right people continued to come into my life at the right time. I was able to verify ninety-five percent of what Henry told me. I did not include anything I couldn't verify. By incorporating more than eighty original photos and documents into the account, I supplied additional proof, interest, and credibility to the reader. In fact, many of the documents have that "Wow" factor.

The awards and incredible support from the Polish American community validate that I got it right. Today, *HENRY: A Polish Swimmer's True Story of Friendship from Auschwitz to America* is recommended reading on the website of the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Los Angeles (<https://losangeles.msz.gov.pl/en/news/books/>). In October 2018 the Polish American Congress of Arizona awarded me their Polish Heritage Award for my efforts to document and communicate the suffering of Poles during the Holocaust. This award will always be the most special among the many awards I have received.

What advice do you have for new writers?

Believe in yourself, invest in yourself. Commit to perpetual learning. Take the time to read other authors, and other genres. Attend workshops and writing events to meet other authors and learn whatever you can to improve your craft. Be a sponge for information. Become tech savvy with social media.

When you write, have something to say. The passion for the message may propel you through multiple drafts, but it is the quality of the craft that will convey a polished

message with the best chance to resonate with readers. No matter how good you may think you are, a professional editor will make you shine. Write for yourself, publish for others.

Favorite Saying?

“The past actually happened, but history is only what someone write down.”

Links:

Website: <https://katrinashawver.com/>

HENRY on the Consulate website: <https://losangeles.msz.gov.pl/en/news/books/>

Buy the Book: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/1633935205>

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