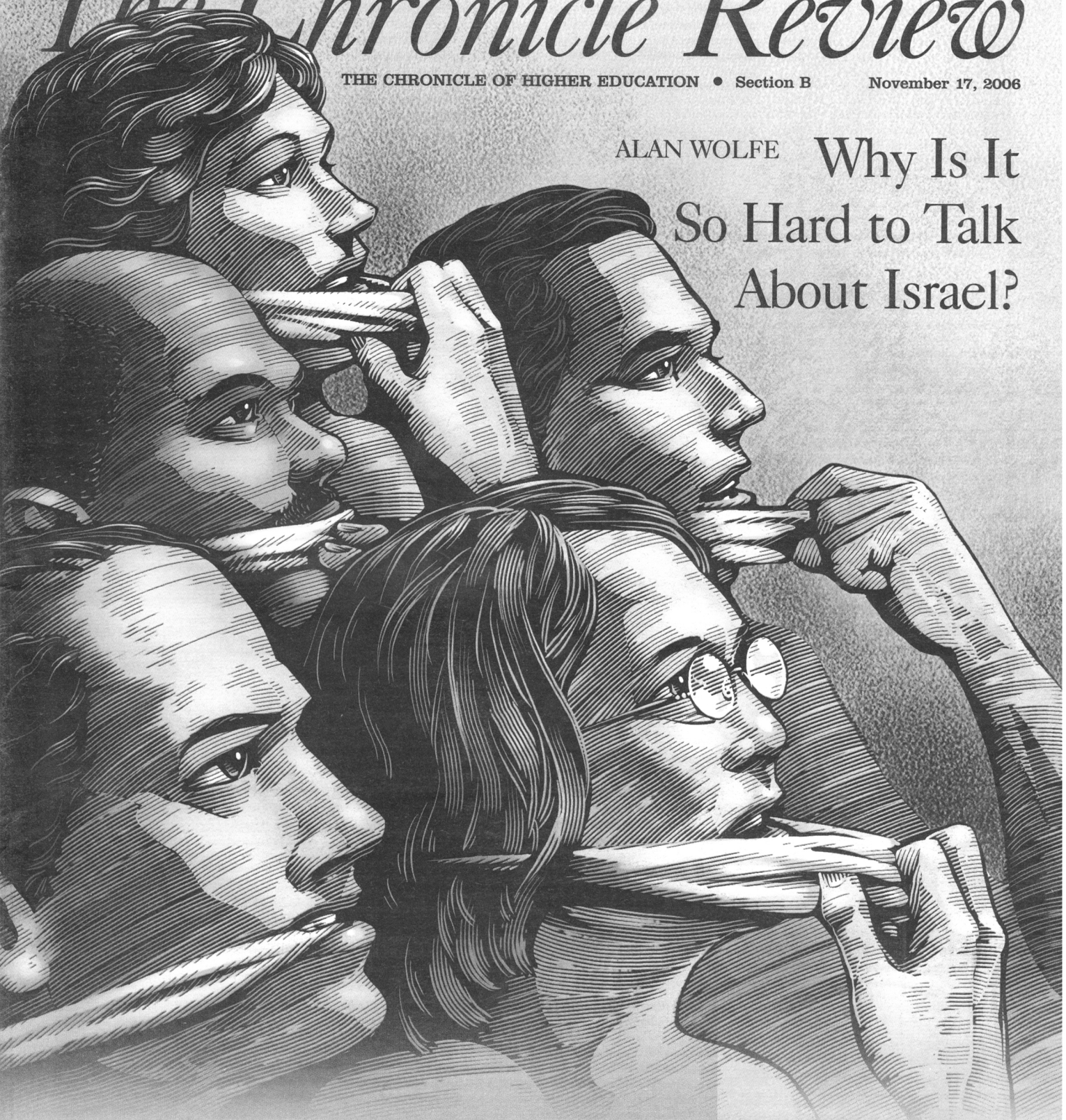


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Adventures in the Land of Wikipedia

By Ann Kirschner

THE BIGGEST and arguably the best general online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, started in 2001 and now includes more than a million entries in 200-plus languages. It is not infallible, but then again, as *Nature* magazine pointed out in a head-to-head comparison, neither is the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. (The latter “was first published progressively from 1768-71 as *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, or, A dictionary of arts and sciences, compiled upon a new plan.” I found that on Wikipedia.) The most powerful insights I’ve gleaned from Wikipedia, how-

Since then my pursuit of new opportunities created by digital media has led me from the stadium box back to the university and the creation of Fathom, an online learning company. Technology even left its mark in the evolution of my first book, despite its subject matter. *Sala’s Gift*, to be published this month, is a historical memoir that tells the story of a secret collection of 350 letters and photographs that my mother, Sala Garncaz, received during five years in Nazi work camps in western Poland. My mother kept that remarkable archive hidden in a cardboard box for

ready in various stages of development. Still, like any author in love with her subject, I wanted everyone, everywhere to know about my discoveries.

So when Wikipedia replaced the Onion as my teenage son’s home page, I noticed. My informal and unscientific sample of inquiring minds among his Net Generation strongly suggested that their research inevitably started with Google and Wikipedia. I also knew that student research often ended there. If I posted to the online encyclopedia, I could vouch for the integrity of my own work, but I worried about the company I would keep. Who were the other people using, writing, and editing the entries? Would the sacred trust of my mother’s letters be compromised? Was I ready to publish something that was instantly accessible to anyone in the world, without regard to the intellectual-property rights in which I had been so carefully schooled? Would I squirm under the scrutiny of strangers who didn’t have the usual credentials of peer review or professional editors?

Curiosity overcame caution. For my first entry last spring, I selected Ala Gertner, who was hanged publicly at Auschwitz in 1945 for her role in the only armed uprising at the camp. Ala met my mother on October 28, 1940, the day they were both deported from Sosnowiec, Poland, to a labor camp. She became a surrogate big sister to my mother and began writing to her a year later when they were separated, continuing until just before she and her husband were sent to Auschwitz in 1943. There she was assigned to the munitions factory, where she joined a secret plot to smuggle gunpowder.

Ala has been my muse for 15 years. Always on my desk is an arresting photograph of her and my mother, taken when they were on a brief furlough from the labor camp in 1941. I had interviewed people who knew Ala during the war, and I knew some of her letters by heart. But while her name appears occasionally in the extensive documentation on the Auschwitz uprising, she left no family survivors, and the little that is published about her is not always factual. She is a footnote in the history of the Holocaust. I wanted to set the record straight.

I DIDN’T NEED to ask an editor’s permission. Anyone can write a Wikipedia article. And “anyone” does, since the writers are anonymous. Amateurs or scholars, they are usually people who care passionately about a subject and want to share their knowledge—free. In fact, if you look up a name or subject that comes up empty on Wikipedia (which helpfully underlines potential new subjects in red), you are invited to fill the gap.

I studied some of the Wikipedia tutorials to get me started. House style: “NPOV,” the scrupulously enforced “Neutral Point of View.” That was something I was used to in scholarship. So far, so good. But when I tried to format my article, I was trapped in the quicksand of HTML codes that lie behind the pretty pages of a Web

site. My page was a mess. Many hours later, I had created the equivalent of a short and sloppy freshman draft. But at least the words were there. My entry on Ala sounded like a Wikipedia article, even if it didn’t look like one.

I returned to the site a few days later and behold, I had been Wikified! My words had not changed, but the entry now looked professional. By clicking on the “History” tab, I could see that the article had been scrubbed several times by automated software programs, known as wiki bots, and by human beings who had fixed my formatting mistakes and added subheads, paragraphs, and proper fonts. Those editorial elves were drawn to the task by a Wikipedia alert that identifies all new entries (and probably flagged mine as that of a struggling neophyte). There are reportedly thousands of volunteers who review entries for the sheer fun of improving them, like the successful investment banker who specializes in editing articles on baseball. He describes his daily edits and fact checks as his “solitaire,” a relaxing brain game for multitasking moments. (For insight into the amazing commitment of such people, take the Wikipediaphic Test, measuring addiction: “Do you hook up to Wikipedia over a wireless Internet connection?” “Is that connection in a restaurant?” “Do you edit Wikipedia while waiting for your meal?” “During your meal?” “While eating?” See <http://people.ucsc.edu/~merphant/wikitest.html>.)

It is that process of collaborative editing that is the heart and soul of Wikipedia. So far, no one had edited my words or challenged my facts—although I know that such controversies are not uncommon. Some entries have triggered litigation, as well as long and soul-searching arbitrations within the Wikipedia community. But in my maiden voyage, I was charmed by the swarm of nanoeditors who descended upon my page to polish away its rough edges.

Emboldened, I tuned up the language in the article and discovered that I could overcome being HTML-impaired by copying lines from other entries, literally cutting and pasting the formatting codes. Soon I had learned the most important trick of all: how to add hyperlinks that would bring me readers from other relevant Wikipedia articles. Ala was soon in the virtual company of Roza Robota, another heroine of the Auschwitz uprising, and of Oskar Schindler, who turned his factory and labor camp, once part of the same Nazi bureaucracy that enslaved Ala and my mother, into a refuge for Jews. Other helping hands then linked Ala to the categories of Women in World War II, the Holocaust, and the long and excellent Wikipedia entry on Auschwitz.

Alas, the article still looked bland. I had hundreds of multimedia assets at my disposal, but I couldn’t figure out how to add a single one. Even if I could have, I was alarmed when Wikipedia confronted me with a bewildering set of copyright options. I had gone to considerable lengths to retain the copyright of the letters and photographs I had donated to the New



CHRONICLE PHOTO ILLUSTRATION
BY ELLEN WINKLER AND SCOTT SEYMOUR

ever, could never have been plucked from *Britannica* or any traditional reference source. That knowledge comes only from the act of sharing.

I can trace my fascination with Wikipedia back to my first technology thrill in 1979: A freshly minted English Ph.D., I was working at the Modern Language Association office when I saw bibliographical data streaming from one source to another through an acoustic coupler fitted to a telephone. (Not exactly the moon landing, I know, but bear with me.) Captivated by the potential of technology to transform content into electronic formats that could be replicated and widely distributed, I moved into cable and satellite television, and then into digital media.

My second turning point came in 1994, when I sailed forth on the World Wide Web via a Mosaic browser. “This is going to be big,” I predicted to my then bosses at the National Football League. A few months later, we launched nfl.com, followed by superbowl.com, where real-time, play-by-play data streamed from NFL press boxes to fans anywhere on the planet became our most popular feature.

nearly 50 years, until she was facing cardiac surgery.

The book had a long gestation period, with roots in a predigital era. I did most of my research the old-fashioned way, logging hours in libraries and archives—but as the years passed and I adopted the tools of the modern historian, I turned to Wikipedia as an excellent first stop for some new thread of inquiry or a quick fact check on, say, the provisions of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939.

How many people would read my book? How long would it stay in print? Scary questions for a first-time author. My family was aware of the historical importance of Sala’s letters—for the light they shed both on the privations in the daily lives of Jews after the Nazis annexed Poland and on this particular network of labor camps where some 50,000 Jews were forced to work—and we had already donated the originals to the New York Public Library. The library exhibited the letters to the general public last spring and created a permanent online exhibit (<http://www.nypl.org/letterstosala>). A traveling exhibit, a documentary film, and a play were al-

York Public Library. Did I need to consult a lawyer again? I stopped right there.

THE NEXT TIME I checked the entry, I was shocked again. There was a photograph. I knew this portrait well, the only other known picture of Ala besides the one saved by my mother. And whoever had added it had correctly attributed it to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. I studied the history tab closely. From the dates in the audit trail left when changes are made, I ruled out the mechanical engineer from Mumbai, the faculty member from the ethnology and cultural-anthropology department of Warsaw University, and the computer-science student at a place identified only as RPI. It had to be "Danny." I linked to his personal information.

An hour later, we were trading e-mail messages, and later that day, we talked on the telephone. Danny turned out to be the remarkable Danny Wool, one of the few full-time employees of the Wikimedia Foundation, who lists "Jewish stuff" among his 10 areas of interest and is a former staff member at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City. From Danny I learned that because it is getting harder to find a major subject uncovered, Wikipedia's emphasis is now on enhancing the quality of its entries and incorporating multimedia links. The Wikipedia gold standard is the "featured article," distinguished by its thoroughness, the quality of its writing, the comprehensiveness of its sources, and its technical proficiency. Pretty much the same things that would distin-

guish any other reference work, except that the author would not usually be the designer.

My technical difficulties and copyright confusion were no surprise to Danny. "We haven't done a good job on the user interface," he told me. We brainstormed about whether Wikipedia volunteers could serve as "buddies" to newcomers and talked about adding some of my mother's videotaped interviews about Ala and about digitizing images of her letters.

Wikipedia is free, its entries part of the global digital commons. Danny says the encyclopedia is trying to be a leader in that free-culture movement. My experience made me a believer: What an extraordinary resource, especially for users in developing nations, where it is the best library in town. I admire Wikipedia's volunteer culture, its open-handed approach to sharing knowledge, and the way it combines two hallmarks of 21st-century learning—collaboration and "just in time" knowledge. I'm comfortable with the protean nature of its articles, which seems appropriate to this shape-shifting world of ours.

Wikipedia will face interesting challenges. I am still thinking about whether to keep my digital assets to myself until Wikipedia writes better copyright guidelines or I get smarter. I wonder, too, whether the site can continue to operate with its current small staff and board of directors, and whether it will face challenges from competitors that are more specialized. Consider this conundrum: Anyone can lift Wikipedia content and place it on an independent, advertising-supported site. I checked, and there was my

Ala Gertner entry framed by ads generated by Google for a cheesy art site, a billing service, and a store that sells Polish DVD's. I may shrug my shoulders, but it may prove tricky to sustain Wikipedia's growth in wholesome ways that do not estrange its volunteer community.

Many of Wikipedia's next steps are laden with political implications within that community, even the decision over making it easier to write an entry. Users are debating whether an easy word-processing-like format might alienate some of the "old-timers," who seem to consider technical prowess as something approaching a moral litmus test. Let's hope that Wikipedia moves in the direction of usability, since some of those who can't figure it out may be the best scholars and thinkers in their fields.

For now, Wikipedia works. I can hardly wait to start another entry drawn from my research. After my experience receiving an excellent assist from this anonymous knowledge army, I'm prepared to believe that Wikipedia's millions of eyes will continue its evolution and improve its quality. But don't take my word for it. Google Ala Gertner, and you'll see my entry as one of the first search results. Or you'll see what I started, since what started as my entry now belongs to Wikipedia's readers. It will be different by the time you get there.

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Wikipedia is an
extraordinary
resource, especially
for users in
developing nations,
where it is the best
library in town.
