The Book of Joseph

Play inspired by resilient family’s wartime letters

By Susan C. Ingram

The open briefcase and scattered letters that sketch a haunting face on the playbill for Everyman Theatre’s production of “The Book of Joseph” are more than clever graphic details.
The real briefcase and letters have revealed many stories — personal, historic, tragic and triumphant — since being discovered in an attic by Baltimorean Richard S. Hollander. Family stories, past and present, are at the root of the play, based on family letters from Krakow during World War II and drawn from Hollander’s 2007 book, “Every Day Lasts a Year.”

Hollander, now 69, came from upstate New York to Baltimore in 1966 to study political science at Johns Hopkins University, married in 1972 and raised three children. He and his wife Ellen, a U.S. District Court judge, have been members of Beth El Congregation in Pikesville since the late 1970s, where Hollander is a past-president. They live in Guilford.

“I think Rich has found deep meaning in discovering this piece of his family’s history and also in getting to know in a deeper way his parents, their hopes and dreams,” said Beth El Rabbi Steven Schwartz. “On the one hand, the story is a universal Jewish story of immigration and its struggles. On the other, it is a deeply personal story of a family, of the relationship between a parent and children, that also has universal elements.”

“It reminds us that the Holocaust happened to real people, real families, people we know in our own lives,” he added. “Sometimes we can think of the Holocaust only in numbers, and that depersonalizes it.”

The Letters

In 1986, Hollander was doing the difficult work of sifting through his parents’ belongings in their Westchester County home following a tragic car wreck in which both were killed. Rummaging through a crawlspace in the attic, he came upon a tan leather briefcase, heavy with something.

He opened it.

Inside were neatly bound stacks of hundreds of letters and postcards sent to Hollander’s father, Joseph, from his family in Poland in the late 1930s and 1940s.

“The letters were in Polish and German and I speak neither,” Hollander said. “Poland was under Nazi occupation at the time, so there are big swastikas on the stamps. I kind of knew what the letters were, although I’d never heard of them. My father never talked about them.”

“It was jarring, perhaps more so than one would expect, because it was coupled with this emotional thing of clearing out the house,” he added.

Hollander knew the letters were important, knew his father had saved them for a reason, but coming on the heels of his parents’ shocking deaths and with his own family and work responsibilities, he chose to wait to explore them in depth.

“I wasn’t at that point emotionally ready to tackle what might be in the letters,” he said. “I had this very idealized image of my father, and anything I learned in addition could only tarnish that image. But little did I realize that the more I delved into his life, the more his image was enhanced. He was a person who saved the lives of many, many Polish Jews and got them out.”

The sad irony that Richard discovered when finally going through the letters in the early 2000s was that Joseph, although helping many Polish Jews escape the occupation, could not rescue his own family from the Holocaust.
The Book
Joseph Hollander and his first wife, Felicia, fled Poland in 1939 when he witnessed Europe unraveling during his work as a travel agent. And although he beseeched his family to leave when borders were still open and international travel still possible, they hesitated, certain as many were that they could ride out the war in Krakow where they were well-established, middle-class, assimilated Jews.

But Joseph and Felicia’s escape was not an easy one, traveling to Romania, Yugoslavia and Italy. Denied entry to Portugal, even though they had proper visas, they eventually landed at Ellis Island in New York Harbor, where, because they had no visas, they fought in immigration court for close to a year before being allowed temporary entrance. Joseph even sent letters to Eleanor Roosevelt pleading their case — saying that being sent back to Europe would, for Polish Jews, be a death sentence.

In the meantime, while trying to secure entrance to the U.S., he was working to secure visas for his family in Poland. As the German occupation tightened, the family had to write in coded language to avoid censorship. When they tried to leave Poland, the Germans were at the borders and they had to return home. When Joseph finally managed to get them Nicaraguan visas, Polish Jews were barred from travel.

“With hindsight, it can be seen that there was very little chance the Nazis would honor the Nicaraguan documents,” Richard Hollander writes in the book. The papers came “excruciatingly close” to saving some of the family.

The hundreds of letters that Joseph saved paint a picture, not only of the bleak realities of Krakow under German occupation and, eventually, life in the ghetto, but of family members that love and care for one another. Their letters to Joseph are often chatty and optimistic, discussing the day-to-day concerns that any family experiences — teenagers complaining, a sister’s difficulties with her divorce (which Joseph eventually went through, too). At the same time, they were always concerned about Joseph’s welfare, telling him not to spend money on care packages and assuring him that they were all well and healthy.

The translator that Hollander sought out to help him decipher exactly what he had in the briefcase told him the collection was an important historical trove. He kept digging, unearthing many other documents, including immigration court transcripts at the National Archives and letters his father Joseph wrote to his second wife, Vita (Richard’s mother), from Europe after enlisting in the U.S. Army. Eventually, in collaboration with Holocaust scholars and authors Christopher R. Browning and Nechama Tec and his son Craig, “Every Day Lasts a Year: A Jewish Family’s Correspondence from Poland” was published by Cambridge University Press in 2007.

The book includes historical context on the state of Polish
Jews during the war, especially in Krakow; a biography of Joseph Hollander, including transcripts of the immigration hearings; and the text of all of the family letters.

The Play

By 2007, Hollander was running his own marketing firm after having worked as a newspaper journalist at Baltimore’s News American and as a television reporter at WBAL-TV. After the book was published, a colleague sent it to his sister, Barbara Gaines, founder and artistic director of Chicago Shakespeare Theater.

In 2011, Gaines commissioned award-winning playwright and author Karen Hartman to adapt the scholarly text for the stage.

“1 ultimately wanted the play to be a story that transcends the Holocaust, or any one moment in history — and become about fathers and sons, about families,” Gaines said. “You become very involved with each member of the family because of Karen’s brilliance as a playwright. She sees the large picture as well as intimate behavior — leading to a play of remarkable depth, joy and forgiveness.”

Hartman was intrigued immediately when Gaines told her about “Every Day Lasts a Year,” even though she had never written a non-fiction book adaptation. Part of her immediate affection for the material was that she, similar to Hollander’s experience, found a trove of old letters and reel-to-reel tapes her father and mother had exchanged when he was in Vietnam.

“I was chilled to the bone from the first conversation. The story felt vast and human. At the same time, I couldn’t get that suitcase out of my head,” Hartman said. “The play was originally supposed to be just an adaptation of the letters themselves, but to me the story is — what were the letters doing in the suitcase all those years? Why weren’t they shared? How do family members protect each other from pain and what is the underside of that protection? What do we lose when we each keep our own ‘suitcase’ of what we don’t want our kids to know?”

Hartman’s challenge was to combine the layers of time and place into a coherent story which contemporary audiences could relate to and understand. In addition, there was the difficult necessity of leavening the tragedy and
horror of the Holocaust with the banality — and even humor — of everyday life.

“The gift of this story, and also the trick of it, is that you have a heroic historical narrative about one man’s escape from Krakow just after the Nazis invaded Poland, you have the brutal story pieced together by letters of his family members who did not escape and then you have this completely modern story about a young father in the 1980s who loses his parents in a car accident and decides not to ask questions about a briefcase of letters in the attic. Which of those stories has priority?” Hartman said. “If you spend too much time in Krakow/World War II (Joseph Hollander) you don’t connect to a modern audience. If you spend too much time on the emotional journey of the man who finally looks in the briefcase (Richard Hollander) you risk trivializing the Holocaust, making it a tool for a contemporary emotional growth.”

It wasn’t until a few years into the writing of the play that Hartman found her answer after early drafts were considered “dry, confusing and too long” by Chicago Shakespeare Theater. Then, she had a “bolt-of-lightning moment” that Richard should be the play’s narrator.

“An unreliable narrator, a guy giving a book talk who will tell us a lot, but skip the parts he doesn’t want us to know,” Hartman said. “And all of my fears that nobody cares about the Holocaust anymore could be his fears, my desperation could be his desperation. And it could be funny. It was such a relief to find that.”

“The way Karen constructed it, with the Richard character talking directly to the audience, from the first moment the audience has skin in the game,” said Hollander. “They are brought into the play and they are part of the play and they are participants, from the beginning.”

In 2017, “The Book of Joseph” premiered at Chicago Shakespeare Theater to popular and critical acclaim. Now, the play is set to open May 9 in Baltimore, where so much of the story originated. Hartman is delighted, including about related events Everyman has scheduled.

“That ‘family’ feeling of a resident company is very rare,” she said. “I’ve never worked with a resident company before. It’s a great fit for this family play.”

For Richard Hollander, seeing his life, his father’s life and his family’s lives dramatized allowed him to see the universal themes running through his family saga, giving him a broader and deeper understanding of his father and his relationship with his own children.

“Everyone has a metaphorical briefcase. Everyone has locked away memory and information about one’s family that they have either hesitated to open, or not opened at all,” he said. “So, what makes this play universal is that everyone can relate to that.”

The Baltimore Players

Like Hartman, Everyman Theatre’s resident director Noah Himmelstein felt an immediate affinity for the play, partly because his grandparents, who were from Poland and Russia, died recently. Himmelstein, 32, grew up in Pikesville, where he and his family attended Temple Oheb Shalom. He now splits his time between Baltimore and Manhattan.

“I read the script and immediately was emotionally affected by it. I consider it a new kind of Holocaust play,” he said. “But a new kind of Holocaust play in terms of the generations now, whether you’re in your 20s, 30s, 40s, the children and the grandchildren of survivors or people who have been lost — what do they do with this knowledge and how do they make sense of it for their own lives? Especially in the last year, where, whether people want to admit it or not, anti-Semitism is back in full force in Europe and here.”

“The play’s central questions are who are your grandparents, who are your parents, what makes them who they are, what are the traditions they keep for our identities, whether it’s Jewish or secular?” he added. “And what are the things that are important that you give to your kids?”

Danny Gavigan, of Philadelphia, plays Joseph, and at 34 is the same age that Joseph is in the play. Although Gavigan is not Jewish, he said the play is universal in its appeal.

“You really start to see it’s a story about the circumstances in their life that have brought them closer than ever. And yes, out of care and love for each other do we spare each other and build these walls around what’s really painful,” Gavigan said. “You see this family start to experience real visceral pain in their circumstances in life, but through the letters, no matter how restrained and censored they are, you start to see it’s a story of them growing closer than they’ve ever been.”

“I found when we were rehearsing it’s so easy to get wrapped up in the poetry, the
circumstances and the hindsight of the situation and let it weigh on you,” he added. “But the more we connect with each other as a family, you really see that it’s coming from a family that just misses their brother, their son, their uncle, who’s trapped in immigration court for many years, trying to find a home that isn’t Poland, while his family is trapped in Poland.”

Baltimore actress Bari Hochwald plays multiple women in the play, including Mania, Joseph’s eldest sister.

Hochwald said during the first read-through of the play, it hit her with a combination of laughter and tears. At a recent play-reading event at the Jewish Museum of Maryland, Hochwald read some of Mania’s part, including a line from one of the letters describing Mania’s feelings about the events unfolding around the family: “Sometimes, I feel like somebody asked me to sing after my tongue was removed.”

“The play] vibrates from the quiet of your person outward into the rings of your own life. You think, ‘I know this story.’ But you don’t. You don’t know this story because you think you are going to hear a Holocaust story,” Hochwald said. “What you hear — what you feel — is a family story. And what you don’t expect is that it is your own family’s.”

The Jewish Museum’s exhibit includes Joseph Hollander’s briefcase along with a selection of family photos and letters. For Marvin Pinkert, the museum’s executive director, the family story is about the “immigration generation.”

“There are all sorts of stories that people feel that children aren’t ready for or they don’t have the equipment to accept — and this is where the play resonates,” he said. “It’s that story between generations of what history is worth preserving and worth sharing and I think this play will inspire people to share that history.”

Beth El Congregation’s Men’s Club has planned a trip to “The Book of Joseph” to honor Hollander’s work in bringing his story to light. Member Elliot Menenbloom said it particularly resonates for him because he had a friend who survived eight concentration camps.

“We hope that attendees will have a richer, perhaps a different view, of the Holocaust era and how the Holocaust impacted one family within our congregation,” Menenbloom said. “In addition, we hope attendees will learn more about family relationships at that time in history and the impact on life today.”

From reflecting on personal family questions and losses, Hochwald said the play then pushes out, asking the audience to consider the world.

“And you move beyond your family to the family of man and the state of our precious globe. I think this is because there are no answers in this play, there are just endless questions, drops of information, space, silences and more questions,” she said. “And that is so much of life — what we don’t know about our history, ourselves, each other.”

“The Book of Joseph” runs May 9-June 10. For information, visit everymantheatre.org/book-joseph or call 410-752-2208.

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