

Cambridge University Press & Assessment

978-0-521-88274-3 — Every Day Lasts a Year

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Excerpt

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PART ONE

JOSEPH'S STORY

Joseph

Richard S. Hollander

His voice was not audible, but he spoke loudly.

He was an ocean away, yet he was a visible pillar of strength.

He was tormented by failure, but succeeded more than he imagined.

He had every reason to abandon hope, yet he created a new world for himself.

Joseph Arthur Hollander is the central character in this book. He left Europe in 1939 and arrived, quite unexpectedly, at Ellis Island on December 6, 1939. As an undocumented refugee, Joseph threw himself at the mercy of the American legal system. By the time he returned to Europe in March 1945, he proudly wore American military fatigues and a U.S. Army dog tag. Then, on July 17, 1945, the enlistee walked into Hitler's office, took an axe, and chopped a block of coffee-colored marble from the Führer's desk. From Berlin, Joseph insightfully wrote to his American bride in English, a language that he had already mastered: "I broke up a piece of Hitler's marble desk on which he signed so many treaties and agreements he never kept and so many murder decrees he fulfilled to the last word" (letter to Vita, July 17, 1945, Berlin).

Mostly, this is the story of my father, a man who was a victim of the Holocaust although he never saw a ghetto, experienced the dehumanizing conduct of Nazi overseers, nor witnessed the indescribable atrocities.

Joseph owed his survival to an improbable sequence of events and a fierce will to survive. He battled against the U.S. government for the opportunity to seek refuge in the country and then battled for the same government in its relentless march to Berlin. To the end, Joseph remained a man of uncompromising integrity, complete humility, and unparalleled determination.

Joseph speaks to us largely through his family, whose members were trapped in a cauldron of hate in Cracow, Poland. The family wrote many scores of letters to Joseph, which are a compendium of prayerful expectations and crushed dreams as well as a valuable historical reference. Unfortunately, we can only guess what Joseph wrote to his family, given that he did not retain copies of his own correspondence (perhaps due to the state of technology at that time). Clearly, the family regarded Joseph as a lifeline. Revealed in nearly every letter is an almost childlike faith in Joseph's ability to provide deliverance. There is no way to calculate the burden of being the only thread of hope of an entire family and its only survivor.

The story of the letters from Cracow begins almost forty-seven years after Joseph's escape from Nazi-occupied Poland. At dusk on October 22, 1986, my parents, Joseph and Vita Hollander, were driving north on a commercial street in suburban Westchester County, New York, returning from a visit to Vita's mother. Vita, who was seventy years of age, was at the wheel. For unexplained reasons, their vehicle suddenly veered off the road and smashed into the wall of a freestanding store on the east side of Central Avenue. The force of the crash jarred the engine block loose and sent it hurtling into the dashboard of the passenger compartment. My parents, who were profoundly in love after forty-one years of marriage, died almost instantly, and within seconds of each other, from massive internal injuries. Their vehicle had crashed into a storefront. I learned of their deaths several hours later in a terse telephone call from a Westchester County police officer who said, "Mr. Hollander, I have some bad news for you. Your parents were killed a few hours ago in a car accident."

Months later, as my parents' only child, I faced the dreaded task that inevitably falls to the offspring of deceased parents: I had to dispose of the contents of the house in which I grew up and that my folks had occupied since 1959. It was as if the house had been left in suspended animation. They were coming home. Food was in the refrigerator; the toothbrushes were neatly placed in their holders; the thermostat was set at a comfortable level.

On the third floor of my parents' split-level home was a crawl-space attic, which was used primarily to store suitcases. This would be the easy part; I had no particular attachment to luggage. As I climbed into

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the attic, I noticed a plain tan briefcase off to the side, with an Air India baggage tag. When I lifted it, I immediately knew it was not empty. Upon opening the briefcase, I saw stacks of letters, all neatly arranged and held together by rubber bands, in just the precise and organized way my father always kept anything that was important. Every letter was addressed to my father. My eyes were quickly drawn to the stamps on the upper right corner of each letter and to the large, hand-stamped Nazi imprints on the backs. Swastika after swastika after swastika jumped out at me. With a slight tremble in my hands, I pulled out one letter, then another. Most were handwritten, but some were typed. Although unable to read the words, I could immediately tell they were in Polish and German.

Although I had never been told of their existence, I instantly knew what they were and from whom they had come. These were letters from my father's immediate family in Poland – the people he never mentioned, the relatives I never knew, and a world from which he endeavored to shield his family, friends, and, undoubtedly, himself. In addition, my father left a treasure of other documents and photographs, including passports, receipts, household inventories, telephone records, business cards, drivers' licenses, personal phone books, and records of monetary disbursements. On the surface, these were documents that typically clutter desks and files and are eventually thrown out. Yet these records were not discarded.

I understood why my father kept the letters and other documents; they were all that remained of the beloved family he left in Poland. I also realized why he entombed the letters in the briefcase. For him, the reminders of vanished family, friendships, culture, and way-of-life were profoundly painful.

Still consumed with grief from the sudden loss of my devoted parents, overwrought with the painful and draining task of packing up the house in which I had spent so many happy years, and trying to cope with a life seemingly in disarray, I could not adequately focus on the briefcase at that time. So, just like my father decades before, I closed the briefcase, literally and figuratively, and brought it to my house, where it rested for more than a dozen years.

Over time, perhaps imperceptibly at first, I came to believe that my father saved the letters for another reason. If he had truly wanted to erase all of the pain inflicted by the Holocaust, he could have discarded the

briefcase. He didn't. He couldn't. That the letters were chronologically organized and neatly secured convinced me that they were left for a purpose. I became convinced that it was my father's unspoken hope that one day I would give a voice to his entire family. This is their story.

Repeatedly, I have repressed anger at myself for not pressing my father to share his journey.

Because of Joseph's shroud of silence about his experience, much of this narrative has been stitched together through shreds of information, travel to Poland, legal documents from the National Archives that are about sixty-five years old, and clues contained in the letters.

Although Joseph never gave an oral history and was incapable of speaking about his ordeal, we fortunately have a remnant of narrative. In 1985, he began writing an autobiography. Sadly, it was never finished. His account was clearly motivated by the births of his three grandchildren. Joseph wrote: "Since the birth of Hillary, our first grandchild, I was toying with the idea of writing my short autobiography – to tell something about my family, myself, the place where I was born, studied and worked. Now, since we are blessed with two more grandchildren Craig and Brett, the undertaking of mine now has a more valid reason." He continued: "I assume as they grow older, they will wonder why they have never known any member of their grandfather's family. It will be difficult for them to comprehend the tragedy of the Holocaust and the loss of all my relatives and finally the miracle of my survival."

* * *

One wonders why Joseph decided to leave his hometown of Cracow, Poland, in 1939. Far from being the prototypical refugee, Joseph had every reason to stay. At thirty-four years of age, he had a law degree from the venerable Jagiellonian University. Joseph was also director of the prosperous Polish Travel Bureau, Poltour, at 36 Szpitalna Street, off Cracow's main square. And, according to a letter he wrote to a Cracow lawyer in 1947, the family owned real estate in the city. With his prosperity, Joseph could afford a car and custom-made suits even during the worldwide depression of the 1930s. His red hair, green eyes, and quick wit may have helped him win the affection of Felicia "Lusia" Schreiber,

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who, at five foot eight and 125 pounds, was a statuesque blonde and a champion swimmer. Felicia, eight years Joseph's junior, was repeatedly described by his family as beautiful, with tendencies toward vanity and arrogance.

After Joseph's marriage to Felicia in Cracow on June 28, 1934, the couple moved into a luxurious high-rise apartment with a balcony overlooking the old city. The lobby of their apartment building was appointed with marble and had an elevator to reach the upper floors. From furniture receipts found with the trove of letters, it is clear that by 1939 Felicia was spending a substantial amount for decorating.

As the only surviving male in his immediate family (his father, Saul, died on May 4, 1933, of natural causes), Joseph wore a mantle of familial leadership. Given his social stature, profitable business, and family responsibilities, abandoning everything for the most uncertain of futures seems an unlikely choice. Never known to act on impulse or out of emotion, only Joseph's near-certain knowledge of dire consequences would have compelled him to leave his loved ones, business, culture, and country for the inevitable struggles of a refugee.

Joseph's decision to leave the familiar for the unknown may have been prompted by what he observed during a three-nation trip to Western Europe in April 1939. The journey probably provided Joseph with an ominous glimpse of the future of European Jewry. Indeed, by the spring of 1939, there was nothing subtle about anti-Semitism in Germany; it was ugly and ubiquitous.

The trip apparently was not long in the planning. Joseph received his British entry visa in Warsaw on April 3, 1939; a French visa in Cracow on April 6; and a German visa on April 19, only days before he left Poland. Although we do not know the purpose of Joseph's European trip, one possible explanation for his visit to London was his transfer of more than \$4,000 from his British bank account to Felicia's cousin, Emile Deligtisch, who lived in New York. Undoubtedly, while in Germany in April 1939, Joseph witnessed the rapidly deteriorating condition of German Jews, and he must have sensed the metastasis of the anti-Semitic German cancer.

In his autobiography, Joseph chronicles the inexorable spread of the virus of hate outward from Germany. Citing the "total upheaval in

Europe” in the 1930s such as Hitler’s seizing of complete power in Germany, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, and the Spanish Civil War, Joseph wrote:

unfortunately, we [Polish Jews] didn’t realize the enormity of the situation and life and business continued as before. The news of the persecution of Jews in Germany had a bad effect in Poland where a majority of the population was basically Anti-Semitic. Attacks on Jews in many cities, especially the smaller ones, on trains and even in public places were common occurrences. The local authorities, the police, and the federal government did not do anything to stop this. The excesses had the main purpose of robbing Jewish homes and plundering their stores and factories. The situation started to convince some Jews, especially the wealthy ones, that leaving Poland was a necessity. But still it was more talk than action.

On July 7, 1939, less than two months before the Nazi invasion, Joseph appeared at the consulate in the Polish city of Katowice and obtained a one-year visa to Great Britain for a “business visit.” Ever prudent, Joseph outwardly maintained a business-as-usual image. In August 1939, for example, he purchased a considerable amount of furnishings for his new apartment, leaving a substantial deposit. One wonders whether the purchase of furniture was an act of intentional deception.

The vexing question is why Joseph’s immediate family – his mother, three sisters, their spouses, and children – did not flee with him. Although we do not know the answer, the letters indicate that Joseph had warned family and friends of his fears and reveal the family’s remorse at failing to follow Joseph’s advice to leave Poland. Nevertheless, it is easy to understand their decision; human imagination could not conceive of the Final Solution. Instead, the family’s frame of reference was probably World War I, a time of deprivation and dislocation but certainly not a time of premeditated extinction of European Jewry. Joseph’s belief that, in the summer of 1939, he should have insisted that his family flee from Poland, and his knowledge that if he had persisted they might have survived, surely tortured him all of his days. A man who had an unsurpassed gift of logic and persuasion failed when it counted most.

One of the great ironies of Joseph’s life is that in the immediate pre-war period, he had already embarked on a long and complicated process

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of saving the lives of many endangered Polish Jews – in all likelihood, almost all strangers. At the same time, he was as yet incapable of leaving Poland with his wife, Felicia, and their respective extended families. The image is haunting. Here was an exceedingly resourceful man working feverishly, at considerable risk, to save Polish Jews and, at the same time, unable to get his own family to heed the obvious warning signs.

In his autobiography, Joseph spoke of his highly successful travel agency in Cracow. With the encroaching shadow of Nazism looming over Poland, the tourism travel business stopped. In a matter-of-fact tone, Joseph writes:

In 1937–38, Hitler expelled Polish Jews, who came to Germany after the First World War and forced them to go back to Poland. They all had Polish passports with expired validity and the Polish government refused to recognize them as Polish citizens. In order to leave Poland and go to another country a valid passport and visa was a necessity. Hundreds of them came to me for help. Having connections – rather costly – in the Interior Ministry in Warsaw, I traveled a couple of times a month to Warsaw where their passports were revalidated.

Here Joseph is describing his own experience of a crisis that was set in motion when the Polish government set a deadline of October 1938 to revalidate old Polish passports. After that date, Poles living abroad without revalidated passports would no longer be considered Polish citizens, and Polish consulates in Germany often refused to revalidate the passports of Polish Jews living there. Faced with the prospect that Polish Jews in Germany would soon become stateless and hence unable to emigrate from that country, the Nazi regime rounded up thousands of Polish Jews and tried to deport them to Poland. In turn, the Polish government sealed its border, and many of these unfortunate refugees were trapped in no-man's land, left to live in tent cities between the two countries. Clearly, if it were not for Joseph's ability to find greedy and corrupt bureaucrats in the Polish Interior Ministry who, for a price, would revalidate the passports of at least some of these expelled Polish Jews, many more would have met that fate.

The next problem was to what country a visa could be secured. All Europe was out. Countries like Panama, Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua etc... were giving – I should say selling – permits to enter. On this

basis, people could leave Poland. I was swamped with work, which I hated, but I knew I was helping them.

Later in life, Joseph wrote that he met many of the people he had saved who managed to leave the Central and South American nations for new lives in the United States, Canada, and Australia. Without any trace of self-aggrandizement for truly heroic work, Joseph merely reported that the Polish Jews he saved “expressed their gratitude for my help.”

One would think that by mid-1939 Joseph had undoubtedly seen more than enough to convince even the most hardcore Pollyanna that there were no happy endings on the horizon. He had helped Polish Jews living in Germany to have their passports revalidated and obtain exit visas to countries in the Western Hemisphere. He witnessed the vicious brutality against innocent Polish Jews, and he had traveled into the heart of the Nazi universe. He had seen Hitler move on Austria and Czechoslovakia. With decades of hindsight, Joseph wrote:

With all this happening, the Jews in Poland didn’t realize the gravity of the situation and continued hoping it would stop. How blind we all were. The easy life blinded us. With all this happening, people started to realize that a danger of war, a German attack on Poland, can be expected. Some, however, believed if it came to war, England and France, having a treaty with Poland, will come to the rescue.

As dynamic and determined as he was, Joseph apparently postponed his personal escape plan. There were still people to help. His autobiography gives some insight into his emotional state.

I just lived from day to day being very busy to help other people leave the country. Anyhow, being of military age, I couldn’t leave according to a new regulation. Towards the end of August 1939, news reached us that Germany was massing an army on the western border of Poland. This created a panic and thousands of people started to move to the eastern part of Poland. And again, I was swamped with work, as the trains were overcrowded. I chartered . . . two sleeping cars, which were attached to a regular overnight train from Krakow to Lwow. This I succeeded to arrange for four days.

One has to marvel at Joseph’s lack of editorializing. There is not a hint of self-congratulations for making arrangements for a last-minute

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evacuation. The rail exodus from Cracow to Lvov on the chartered sleeping cars probably took place in the last days of August 1939.

Three fates awaited the refugees who managed to get to Lvov. A minority crossed over into Romania and then to other sanctuaries. A second group remained in Lvov, only to be overtaken and murdered by the Nazis in 1941. A third group survived by virtue of being deported to Siberia or Kazakhstan by the Stalinist regime prior to June 1941.

Unfortunately, Joseph's autobiography ends abruptly with the brief description of chartering the sleeping cars from Cracow to Lvov. It was written in 1985–6; he was killed in October 1986. The unresolved question is whether he ran out of time to complete the story or was, instead, emotionally incapable of writing the remaining chapters. Fortunately, for those trying to reconstruct Joseph's escape, Polish authorities required passes for international travel. There is documentation of a request for permission to stay in a hotel in the Polish city of Lvov. Located east of Cracow near what was then the Polish southeastern border with Romania, Lvov was the ideal jumping-off point for a quick crossing. Joseph's planning was meticulous. Given the chaos of war, anything short of perfect planning invited disaster. On August 10, 1939, he booked an open-ended stay at a spa in the resort village of Zaleszczyki, which became the exit point for thousands of Poles, including government officials, fleeing the advancing Nazi armies. Then, on September 6, 1939, at the Romanian consulate in Lvov, Joseph obtained a forty-eight-hour, one-time transit visa into Romania.

Ever mindful that government documents are ultimately just paper, Joseph also took several large, loose jewels with him in the event he needed to entice border guards. It is not known how many of the gems found their way into the palms of corrupt immigration officials.

Joseph's passport reflects that on September 18, 1939, seventeen days after the Wehrmacht smashed into Poland and just one day after Soviet forces invaded Poland from the east to secure Stalin's territorial reward for his Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler, Joseph crossed into Romania at the Crisana Bridge. Within weeks of the invasion, Warsaw fell to the Nazis, effectively sealing the fate of three million Polish Jews who were left behind. Joseph's family was among them.

With Joseph at the Crisana Bridge were his wife, Felicia; a fourteen-year-old boy, Arnold Spitzman; the boy's aunt and uncle, Henrik and