

EVERY DAY LASTS A YEAR

Richard S. Hollander was devastated when his parents were killed in an automobile accident in 1986. While rummaging through their attic, he discovered letters from a family he never knew – his father’s mother, three sisters, and their husbands and children. The letters, neatly stacked in a briefcase, were written from Cracow, Poland, between November 1939 and December 1941, vividly depicting day-to-day life during the Holocaust. At the same time, Richard’s father, Joseph Hollander, who had entered the U.S. illegally in 1939, was fighting the government to avoid deportation to Poland and certain death. Hollander was astounded to learn that his father saved the lives of many Polish Jews, but – despite heroic efforts – could not save his family. Now in paperback, the book features a new preface by Richard S. Hollander and a speech written by Joseph that was not included in the critically acclaimed hardback edition.

Richard S. Hollander’s grandmother, aunts, their spouses, and their children wrote the poignant and powerful letters from Cracow, Poland (1939–1941) that comprise the bulk of this book. Mr. Hollander is the author of *Video Democracy*, a look at the impact of interactive technology on American politics. He has been a reporter with two daily newspapers and with WBAL-TV in Baltimore, Maryland. Presently, Mr. Hollander is president of Millbrook Communications in Baltimore, an advertising and marketing firm representing professional sports teams and Maryland Public Television.

Christopher R. Browning is the Frank Porter Graham Professor of History at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is the author of seven books on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, including *The Origins of the Final Solution* and *Ordinary Men*, both winners of the National Jewish Book Award in the Holocaust category.

Nechama Tec is Professor Emerita of Sociology at the University of Connecticut, Stamford, and author of seven books. Her *Resilience and Courage*, *Women, Men, and the Holocaust* won the National Jewish Book Award. Others won numerous prizes and were nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award.

EVERY DAY LASTS A YEAR

A Jewish Family's Correspondence from Poland

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-88274-3 — Every Day Lasts a Year

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107668768

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First published 2007

Reprinted 2007

First paperback edition 2014

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Every day lasts a year: a Jewish family's correspondence from Poland /

Richard S. Hollander, Christopher R. Browning, Nechama Tec.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-88274-3 (hardback)

1. Hollander, Joseph Arthur. 2. Jews – United States – Correspondence. 3. Jews, Polish –

United States – Correspondence. 4. Refugees, Jewish – United States – Correspondence.

5. Holocaust, Jewish (1939–1945) – Poland – Influence. 6. Jews – Poland – Correspondence.

I. Hollander, Richard S. II. Browning, Christopher R. III. Tec, Nechama. IV. Title.

E184.37.H65A4 2007

940.53'18 – dc22 2007017924

ISBN 978-0-521-88274-3 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-66876-8 Paperback

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To Joseph Hollander – who left us their story and forged his own.

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Introduction and Acknowledgments

The historian trying to write about the life and death of Polish Jewry during the Holocaust faces a major dilemma. Most of the surviving contemporary documents are those written by the Nazi perpetrators, not the victims. Not only were some 90 percent of Polish Jews murdered, most of the records of the Jewish communities as well as the personal papers, letters, and diaries of individual Polish Jews were destroyed as well. The constant uprooting of the Jewish population as well as the looting and confiscation of Jewish property that both preceded and followed their destruction were not conducive to the preservation of such precious documents. The Ringelblum Archives for Warsaw and a substantial amount of material from Lodz are the exception. There are no comparable collections of surviving Jewish documentation from other cities in Poland.

The postwar memoirs and testimonies of the survivors are, of course, one essential source for historians trying to compensate for the loss of so much contemporary documentation, but postwar memories – filtered through catastrophe and survival – cannot fully recapture the perspective and state of consciousness of an earlier period when not only was the Holocaust not yet known but for most was totally inconceivable. The rare surviving diaries and letters written after the German occupation but before the mass murder – particularly from cities other than Warsaw and Lodz – are therefore an invaluable historical resource to recreate the world of Polish Jewry on the edge of destruction. They allow us entry into the lives and consciousness of those who sensed the terrible danger but did not yet know the outcome, of those who struggled with unprecedented problems but who also had to continue dealing with the

joys and tensions of everyday family life, of those who hovered between hope and despair.

This extensive collection of letters written to Joseph Hollander in New York by his family in Cracow between 1939 and 1941 is especially rare and valuable in two regards. First, the collection is a near complete run of letters – only a few that were apparently lost in the post seem to be missing – extending over more than two years. The letters allow us to chart change over time. Second, they preserve for us nine different voices – six women and three men – spanning three generations. We can see the same events and experiences from different perspectives and vantage points.

The publication of this extensive collection of letters posed serious challenges. The vast majority of the letters were handwritten, not typed. Most were written in Polish, reflecting the relatively assimilated, urban, upper-middle-class standing of the family. However, the two oldest correspondents (Joseph's mother and his brother-in-law, Salo) who were in school before World War, when Cracow was still part of the Habsburg Empire, wrote in German. So did another brother-in-law, Munio, who was educated in Vienna. Professor Barbara Bernhardt both transcribed and translated the bulk of the Polish-language letters and some of the German letters. Joseph's mother employed an old nineteenth-century style of German handwriting that is mystifying to the nonspecialist. Jeanette Norfleet provided the necessary expertise to decipher, transcribe, and translate the mother's contributions to the correspondence. Some additional letters in Polish that came to light near the end of the project were translated by Joanna Asia Mieczkowska and Nechama Tec. This project could not have been even conceived much less brought to completion without the essential help in transcription and translation of these individuals.

The Hollander family's involvement was key. Craig Hollander's initial analysis of these letters in an award-winning undergraduate essay at Columbia University helped set this project in motion, and Ellen Hollander provided valuable advice and support.

As is often the case in publishing a book, the title is one of the last matters to be settled. The letters offered a wealth of possibilities. "Every day lasts a year" was written by Berta Hollander on May 26, 1941, as she waited anxiously to receive her son Joseph's next letter.

Introduction and Acknowledgments **xi**

My son, Craig, did the initial scholarly research on the letters from Cracow as part of an undergraduate thesis in the history department at Columbia University. Craig’s insight and analysis were invaluable. Craig received his doctorate in history from Johns Hopkins University in 2013.

People Frequently Mentioned in the Correspondence

Joseph (Józiu) Hollander (born 1905): the recipient of the family letters from Cracow

Lusia (Felicia) Hollander: Joseph's first wife

Berta (Beila) Hollander (born 1866): Joseph's mother

Mania Nachtigall (born 1890): Joseph's sister, wife of Salo (Gabryel) Nachtigall

Klara Wimisner (born 1893): Joseph's sister, wife of Dawid Wimisner, mother of teenage daughters Lusia and Genka

Dola Stark (born 1901): Joseph's sister, wife first of Henek Stark, then of Munio Blaustein

Lusia (Dola) Wimisner (born 1924): Joseph's niece, Klara and Dawid's younger daughter

Genka (Genia, Eugenia) Wimisner (born 1921): Joseph's niece, Klara and Dawid's older daughter

Dawid Wimisner (born 1890): Joseph's brother-in-law, husband of Klara

Salo (Gabryel) Nachtigall (born 1878): Joseph's brother-in-law, husband of Mania

Munio Blaustein (Bransdorfer): Joseph's brother-in-law, second husband of Dola

Jan Schreiber: Joseph's wife's brother, living in New York City

Regine Hütschnecker: Munio Blaustein's sister, living in Switzerland

Feliks Palaszek: Joseph's former business associate

Henek Stark: Joseph's brother-in-law, Dola's first husband, died in Soviet-occupied Galicia

Arnold Spitzman: fourteen-year-old refugee boy Joseph and Felicia take under their care in Italy and travel with to the United States

Adele: Joseph's wife's relative, living in Vienna

Leo, Paula: Joseph's cousins, living in New York City

Cambridge University Press & Assessment

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1. Dola Stark. Joseph's youngest sister contemplated divorcing her husband Henek, who abandoned her and fled to Soviet-occupied Eastern Galicia. After Henek's death, Dola anxiously sought Joseph's approval of her sudden marriage to her newfound love, Munio Blaustein.

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2. Klara Wimisner. Joseph's second eldest sister wrote Joseph that "we live like on a volcano" but also expressed her faith in God. Occasionally she despaired, as when she wrote, "The more I get to know people the more I treasure dogs."

3. Eugenia "Genka" Wimisner. Klara and David's firstborn was the moodier sibling. "I do not feel alive," she wrote. "What I see is quite black."



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4. **Lusia Wimisner.** Genka's cheery younger sister, who excelled as a seamstress and discovered her "true talent" as a teacher in the Cracow ghetto. The opposite of her older sister in temperament, she wrote, "I see everything in bright colors. I have enough joy of life for this whole highly respected family of ours."



5. Dawid Wimisner. Klara's husband and Joseph's brother-in-law. He wrote infrequently to Joseph. The family made numerous references to his energy but also to his irascibility. He occasionally tried Joseph's patience with his complaints.

6. Salo Nachtigall. Mania's husband and Joseph's brother-in-law. Salo belatedly considered the option of leaving Poland. "Many people register themselves for emigration overseas," he wrote. "In order not to blame ourselves later we are thinking about doing the same."



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7. **Amalia “Mania” Nachtigall.** The eldest of the three Hollander sisters. Her son, Ignacy, died before the war. Reacting to the swirl of events, she wrote: “Sometimes, I feel like somebody asked me to sing after my tongue was removed.”

8. **Vita Hollander.** Joseph’s wife and author Richard Hollander’s mother was born in the United States. Vita and Joseph were married in 1945, hours before he was shipped overseas to fight the Nazis. Joseph’s letters to her from the European front speak of his search for his family.



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9. Joseph Arthur Hollander. This photo is Joseph as a young man in Cracow. He was the youngest of the four Hollander children. After he arrived in the United States in December 1939, the U.S. government made every effort to have him deported back to Europe.

10. Joseph Arthur Hollander. He enlisted in the U.S. Army and returned to Europe as a soldier. He wrote Vita of his powerful reactions to defeating Germany.



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11. Joseph and Vita Hollander. Pictured at a cousin's wedding. They had a storybook marriage and died together in a car accident in 1986.

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12. Saul and Berta Hollander. Parents of Joseph, Mania, Klara, and Dola. Saul died of natural causes before the war. Berta was the family matriarch, who is credited with the extraordinary family cohesion in the midst of the most dire circumstances.

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13. Refugees Dr. Joseph A. Hollander, 12-year-old Arnold Spitzman, Mrs. Felicia Hollander, and Marek Morsel (from left) arrive in New York City, December 6, 1939. Photographer unknown, courtesy of Nick Spitzman.

Preface

Richard S. Hollander

We are perpetually children. No matter our age, they are the adults and we are their children. There seems to be an emotional barrier to envisioning our parents *before* our own birth – and certainly before our parents met each other and married.

My father, Joseph Hollander, and I had a close, loving, and mutually respectful relationship, but we never ventured into his sealed past of Holocaust, immigration, and the family left behind to die in concentration camps. As stated in the chapter “Joseph,” the creation of a wall was simple to understand: neither my father nor I wanted to inflict emotional pain on the other. It was better to live in the present and the future than the past.

I didn’t volunteer to explore my father’s past; it was thrust on me. In a dark attic, I literally stumbled on the briefcase containing the letters and numerous personal documents that comprise this book. Yet far from embracing what I now consider a gift, I left the letters untouched in the tan leather Air India briefcase. The compulsion to have the letters translated and ultimately published was only marginally related to my relationship with my father. As far as I knew, we had nothing in our relationship to repair – it was an absolute joy and privilege to be his son. In fact, if memory serves me correctly, the very last thing I said to him as he stood on the front lawn of his Westchester house on that bright afternoon in October 1986, waving “goodbye” to me; my wife, Ellen; and our three children, was “I love you.” One cannot improve on that.

What compelled me to move forward on this project was to further Holocaust studies and to give breath, substance, and meaning to my

father's family. I don't know why he never pursued the same task – maybe leaving the letters and attendant documents behind was intentional.

Every Day Lasts a Year was a work in progress from its inception. Dr. Christopher R. Browning, one of the nation's foremost Holocaust scholars, instantly recognized the value of the letters as primary source material. Here was this treasure of material from the victims of Nazi atrocities. As a rule, losers don't write history. And the fact that the central characters were women – my father's mother and three sisters – made the letters historically significant from the perspective of gender.

Since Cambridge is an academic press, it seemed clear from the beginning that the focus of the book would be the letters. Chris wisely said he would place the letters in historic context, and recruited Dr. Nechama Tec to look at the sociology of the family dynamic. Even my son Craig, then in college, would contribute to the project, annotating and researching. Finally, I would write a brief biography of Joseph. In this manner, *Every Day Lasts a Year* would be a Holocaust history book giving insight into one Jewish family living in Cracow, Poland. Joseph was less of a participant in the story than he was a recipient of mail.

The traditional path is that a thesis evolves into a book. With *Every Day Lasts a Year*, the path was reversed. The book became the catalyst to uncover powerful themes in my father's life.

As I began to research my brief biographical sketch of Joseph, his hidden world opened up for me. What I was too timid to ask him in life became a living, vivid, and compelling story after his death. Delving into the research, I was worried that the Joseph Hollander that would emerge wouldn't measure up to my extraordinary ethical, moral, caring, and loving father. What son or daughter would want to shatter an idealized image?

To my relief and joy, the Joseph Hollander that rose from the archives and research was even more heroic, courageous, and brilliant than the image I carried with me. All the great qualities he possessed as my father were there in abundance in the crucible of the Holocaust.

I call this book a work in progress because thematically it is far broader in scope than a translation of letters, however important the letters may be. Without losing its initial focus of the letters from Poland, for me, *Every Day Lasts a Year* evolved into an intensely personal and emotional

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investigation into my father's world, and what started as a brief biographical sketch was transformed into a wealth of universal, compelling themes.

One cannot read the story of Joseph's escape from Nazi-occupied Poland, serendipitous arrival in the United States, and immediate detention by authorities without cringing in embarrassment for our government. What compassionate and just government would expend an astonishing amount of time and energy to deport to their inevitable deaths a couple and a 12-year-old child?

There is the story of Joseph the son who worked frantically and desperately behind the scenes to rescue his family. When one places Joseph's tireless and imaginative rescue efforts in the context of his deportation peril, the story becomes heroic. Yes, a Hollywood ending would have been better, but that does not detract from Joseph's obsession to free those he loved.

What of Joseph the GI who was sent into the caldron of a fallen Germany to seek news of survival and dreading the inevitable? Even with the perspective of decades, I cannot begin to fathom the emotional tsunami that must have engulfed my father sifting through the wreckage of Germany, European Jewry, and his family.

Finally, who was this beautiful woman that Joseph the future husband met on a train who would later rescue him? They had almost nothing in common. My mother Vita was a shy artist who knew little of the world beyond Brooklyn and whose foreign-language skills never extended beyond high school Latin. He was a multi-lingual, highly resourceful lawyer/businessman who had traveled extensively and had been previously married.

So, pick your story. Select a theme. I would never have known Joseph Hollander prior to my birth if it were not for the opportunity to contribute to this history book, but through research I was blessed to be able to reconstruct his life *before* I was born. I saw a real person, and his image was untarnished.

The publication of *Every Day Lasts a Year* set in motion a number of events that have and continue to affect the father-son relationship.

In January 2008, two months after this book's publication, I was standing in a living room in an exquisite home in the Hancock Park section

of Los Angeles about to give a book talk. My cell phone rang. It was my son, Craig: “Dad, you’re not going to believe this. I just heard from Arnold Spitzman’s son.”

This book tells the story of how my father rescued the 12-year-old Arnold from a sickbed in Italy and brought him to the United States. As with my father and his then-wife Lucia, the U.S. government attempted to deport Arnold and refuse him sanctuary for the duration of the war. My father boldly asserted at their immigration hearing that he would be responsible for Arnold and that the young refugee would not be a ward of the state.

While researching the biographical chapter on my father, I attempted to locate Arnold. I knew he lived most of his adult life in Brazil, but despite several phone calls to Brazil and other efforts, I was unsuccessful. But shortly after the book was published a young man named Nicholas Spitzman was sitting on a Miami beach reading it. He couldn’t believe his father’s story was in print or, to be accurate, on the Internet.

Nick correctly assumed that Craig had a Facebook page. He wrote to Craig: “I have randomly found your father’s book on the internet and have been googling around to try and find a way to get in touch. To make a long story short, I am the son of Arnold Spitzman.”

Every book talk or interview invariably returned to the question of Arnold. What happened to the boy rescued and brought to the United States? Now I would finally be able to answer that question. More importantly, Arnold was, to the best of my knowledge, the only surviving person who could give me insight and facts related to the escape from Europe and the immigration prosecution.

Shortly thereafter, I met Nick in Chicago. Sixty-eight years had elapsed since Arnold traveled on the *Vulcania* from Naples to New York, and Arnold lived a full and highly productive life. While still a teenager, Arnold married an American, Esther Schweitzer. They had two daughters. He served in the army, but did not see combat. As a civilian, Arnold worked in the minerals and jewelry business. In the mid-1950s, Arnold moved to a small city in the interior of Brazil. Later, he relocated with his wife and daughters to Rio de Janeiro, where he became the manager of a jewelry store near the Copacabana Palace Hotel. In the early 1970s, Arnold and Esther divorced and she moved back to the United States

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with their daughters. Then at age 46, Arnold married a Brazilian, 22-year-old Iris. Nick was born in 1984.

As a reaction to rampant violent crime in Rio (Iris was robbed at gunpoint several times, the jewelry store was robbed, their apartment was robbed), the Spitzman family decided in 1995 to leave Brazil for the United States. After 37 years in Brazil, Arnold and Iris settled in the Florida panhandle beach resort of Destin. The reason why I couldn't find Arnold in Brazil is because he was no longer there.

In March 2008, I traveled with my wife, Ellen, to meet Arnold and Iris in their Destin home. My expectations were unrealistically high. I arrived with a briefcase filled with documents to show Arnold and refresh his memory. There were copies of newspaper clippings, the letter to Eleanor Roosevelt where he is mentioned, transcripts of his testimony at immigration hearings, letters from Poland, and more.

It was gratifying just to meet Arnold. Not only was he a living link to my father's youth, but even in his 80s he was energetic, vibrant, and thoroughly engaged in the moment. Arnold, who was still working every day, was obviously someone who appreciated and relished the gift of the years he gained by escaping from Europe.

We talked and talked. He carefully reviewed the documents. Arnold apologized for not being able to add to the narrative of the escape and immigration trials. I was disappointed that Arnold could not share stories about my father and, in fact, his first wife.

"You have to understand," Arnold explained. "I was a child and your father was the adult. Whatever he told me to do, I did."

Arnold paused for emphasis.

"I will say this. If it were not for your father's kindness, courage, and compassion, I would not have survived. I would never have left Europe and, if I got to the United States, I would have been sent back."

The next day Ellen and I left Destin to return to Baltimore. I was not sure what, if anything, I learned from Arnold. What I took away from our meeting was of far greater significance than an anecdote from 1939 or 1940.

"What a privilege it is," I said to Ellen, getting into the rental car to drive to the airport, "to hear another person describe my father as a hero. Everyone should have that moment to hear someone say his or her parent is a hero."

After the publication of *Every Day Lasts a Year*, the Chicago Shakespeare Theater commissioned the playwright Karen Hartman to write a drama based on my father's life. At the time I'm writing this preface, the script is completed and the play is in its development stage. Essentially, the play is the story of a son fulfilling a father's legacy: after his father's death and the discovery of family letters and other documents, Joseph is not emotionally ready to share his story. In the first lines of his incomplete autobiography, however, it becomes clear that he wanted to explain his story to future generations.

As in reality, the script details how the burden of telling Joseph's story falls on me, his son. Well before anyone conceived of a play, I was acutely aware that I was the keeper of my father's legacy—an emotionally wrenching and weighty task. From the instant I saw the briefcase in the attic after my parents were killed and looked at the letters so neatly organized and stacked in chronological order, I knew this was the path my father wanted me to travel. In introspective moments, I realize that there is virtually no higher task or calling than to complete a mission that one's parent was unable to achieve in life. And, if reaching that objective creates a legacy for one's parent, it is both humbling and gratifying.

Karen Hartman echoes my sentiments: "The story of Joseph Hollander is to me a story of legacy. In creating the semi-documentary play, I focused on Rich's discovery of the letters and the sudden death of his parents, his choice to put them away, and his own children's eventual need to know what was written in the letters. This moving collection poses a universal question: how does the pain of past generations become a gift for the present?"

I have no idea whether the play will be a commercial success, but that is beside the point: I am finally ready to share my father with everyone who reads this book or sees the play on stage. The story I hid from myself and all others for many years has emerged, and I am happy his story belongs to all of us.