

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88274-3 - Every Day Lasts a Year: A Jewish Family's Correspondence from Poland

Edited by Christopher R. Browning, Richard S. Hollander and Nechama Tec
Frontmatter

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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. They depict day-to-day life under the most extraordinary pain and stress, yet the family remained a caring, loving unit. At the same time, Richard's father, Joseph Hollander, was fighting the U.S. government to avoid deportation and death. The struggle over whether to deport Joseph involves such historic figures as Eleanor Roosevelt, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, senators, congressmen, federal agency heads, and judges. Richard was astounded to learn that his father saved the lives of many Polish Jews, but – despite heroic efforts – could not save his family.

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.

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**A Jewish Family's
Correspondence from Poland**

Introduced and Edited by

Christopher R. Browning

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Richard S. Hollander

Nechama Tec

University of Connecticut, Stamford

Annotated by

Craig Hollander

Christopher R. Browning



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

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Contents

Introduction and Acknowledgments	<i>page</i> ix
People Frequently Mentioned in the Correspondence	xi
Photograph Gallery follows page	xiv

PART ONE. JOSEPH'S STORY

Joseph	3
<i>Richard S. Hollander</i>	

PART TWO. CRACOW

The Fate of the Jews of Cracow under Nazi Occupation	45
<i>Christopher R. Browning</i>	
Through the Eyes of the Oppressed	60
<i>Nechama Tec</i>	

PART THREE. THE LETTERS

1 Letters without Reply: November 1939–May 1940	103
2 Separation Anxiety: May–August 1940	128
3 Exit Strategy: September–December 1940	169
4 Familial Love, Penned: January–December 1941	209
Index	281

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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

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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 I, 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. Jeannette 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.

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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