in print

the letters he kept

by Margarite Nathe
photos by Paul Fetters

Every Day Lasts a Year: A Jewish Family's Correspondence from Poland. By Christopher Browning, Richard Hollander, and Nechama Tec. Cambridge University Press, 285 pages, $28.00.

THE ATTIC, Rich Hollander decided, would be the least painful place to begin. He walked past the refrigerator (still full of food) and the thermostat (still humming), and up the stairs. The house was just as his parents had left it.

Months earlier his seventy-year-old mother Vita had been driving, with his father Joseph in the passenger seat, when the car had veered off the road and into a storefront. "My parents, who were profoundly in love after forty-one years of marriage," Hollander writes, "died almost instantly, and within seconds of each other."

Up in the third-floor attic, Hollander looked around at the old suitcases and bags, and began sifting through them. One old briefcase, though, was surprisingly heavy. He sat down with it, pulled the tabs apart, and the clips sprang open.

Inside, stacked neatly and held together by rubber bands, were hundreds of letters and postcards, all addressed to Joseph. They were written in Polish and German, and so Hollander couldn't read them. But the hand-stamped swastikas and Nazi imprints in the upper corner of each letter were clear. There were dozens of old photographs of strangers, along with the beginnings of Joseph's autobiography, which cut off at around 1939. There were old passports in the attic, too, and receipts, telephone records, business cards, household inventories—the kinds of things his father usually threw out.

Neither of his parents had ever mentioned the attic archive before, Hollander says, "but I knew exactly what it was."

Joseph probably stowed the letters in the attic because he wanted to forget about them, but he would never have thrown them out—they were all that was left of the family, friends, language, culture, and history that he had lost during the Holocaust.

Finding the archive then was unbearable for Hollander. He closed the briefcase and tucked it away in his own house. It stayed there for fourteen years.

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AS A CHILD, HOLLANDER KNEW that his father had moved to the United States from Poland and that he had no other family. "But my father never talked about any of this," Hollander says. "I knew only the most fragmentary stuff about it." His mother was a strict gatekeeper for her husband's sensibilities—even during the 1970s and 80s, when Holocaust books and movies were becoming more common, never did a single one enter their home.

"I had the letters translated when I finally had the courage to do it," Hollander says. He took them to Polish professor Barbara Bernhardt at American University. When he returned months later to pick up the translations, he found Bernhardt sobbing. "You don't understand what you have here," she said to him.

"I've done many translations in my life, but not like this," Bernhardt says. She'd spent months pulling the fragile bits of paper from the envelopes and getting to know the family. The letters, she says, are powerful testimonies from a Jewish family who lived under constant threat and still managed to have hope, humor, and gentleness. "In situations of crisis we're usually reduced to instinct," Bernhardt says. "But they weren't reduced to scared little creatures, especially not the women."

After talking with Bernhardt, Hollander realized he had work to do. "That's when I began peeling back of the leaves of the artichoke," he says. He asked around, and finally a professor at Columbia led him to contact Christopher Browning at UNC.

Browning, a historian whom the *New York Times* calls "the master of Holocaust scholarship," had never seen anything like Hollander's letters. In fact, he says, Holocaust historians have never had access to anything like this before—an uninterrupted, two-year narrative from an entire family living under the Nazi boot. "You have nine people—three generations, six women, three men—that are writing," he says. "You're getting the whole family, with their different perspectives and their different personalities." And unlike authors of Holocaust-survivor memoirs, these writers had no idea how their story would end. Their letters are filled with anxiety, uncertainty, and hope, which, Browning says, is a very different way to tell a story. An early letter from Joseph's sister Klara reads:

> *Here, thank God, not much changes. We all are healthy and that's the most important thing… I cook every day for many people. Sometimes I start distributing dinner at 1 p.m. and end at 4. I can do it in such a way that it's never too little. Maybe I have a profession for America? Only my hands are not good for the piano anymore. I would like it to be my only worry…*

Browning immediately wanted to help Hollander learn more about the letter-writers and eventually publish the correspondence. "But not all the letters had been translated yet," Browning says. A few were typed, but the rest were handwritten; the oldest family members had scribbled their letters out in a nineteenth-century German hand that was so illegible that translators had trouble identifying the language. And even the translated letters weren't ready to publish; most were undated, and used a lot of code. Joseph's family knew the Nazis were reading Poland's outgoing mail, and to avoid attracting attention to themselves—risking "getting their names on a list," as Browning says—they referred to Russia as "Uncle Tolstoy" and to the Germans as a "horrible old aunt"; "out-of-town guests" was code for other Jewish families who'd been forced to squeeze into the Hollanders' tiny apartment in the Krakow ghetto.

"A few of the letters were lost," Browning says, "but these letters were crossing the Atlantic in the middle of the war. It's remarkable how many of them actually got there. *And* that Joseph saved them."

Even so, only half the correspondence survives—the letters Joseph wrote back to his family are lost. "And Joseph's is an extraordinary story in its own right," Browning says, "because he's the one who got out."

If Joseph's autobiography left Hollander stunned, it was nothing to what he found after a little more investigation: in the archives of the American federal court were hundreds of pages of transcripts and documentation, all about Joseph. Hollander approached an immigration historian about it and was surprised to hear that she already knew about Joseph's dramatic landing in the United States. "Your father was the Elian Gonzalez of 1940," she told him.

Joseph had a successful life in Krakow; he had a law degree and was the director of a Polish travel agency before he fled. But the anti-Semitic rumblings he heard during his business travels around Europe were unsettling. When Hitler ordered all Jews to leave Germany, droves of them came to Joseph for help. So Joseph did what he could for them: he bribed officials in the Interior Ministry in Warsaw to revalidate expired passports, and paid huge sums for visas to Nicaragua, Cuba, and other Latin American countries whose gates hadn't yet been slammed shut. He helped hundreds of Jews escape before Germany closed its fist over Poland.

When word came in August of 1939 that Germany was massing an army on Poland's border, Joseph and his first wife made secret plans to leave Poland. He urged his family to do the same. They decided to stay, and that haunted him for the rest of his life.

Joseph's plan was to reach Portugal, a neutral country, and wait for the war to end. But Joseph, his wife Luisa, and a boy they'd taken in during the trip weren't allowed to disembark in Lisbon, despite their carefully procured paperwork. They were forced to stay on the ship until it came to port, finally, in New York. When they reached Ellis Island, the port authority ordered their immediate deportation back to Poland, where by that time Jews were being deposed from their businesses and funneled into ghettos. The three threw themselves on the mercy of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), which was not inclined to be merciful.

But Joseph was methodical and relentless; for months, he worked with translators and lawyers to wade through U.S. immigration laws. He pleaded with the INS and the federal courts, appealed the deportation order several times, and wrote letters to senators, the secretary of state, and even Eleanor Roosevelt (to which she responded). The press picked up the story; the *New York Times* ran a news story about them.

While Joseph was fighting deportation in the States, his family was struggling against deportation in Krakow. "Krakow was different from other European cities," Browning says. The Nazi governor of Poland chose it as his colonial capital, and so there were no uprisings or battles there like the ones that destroyed Warsaw. "While other cities brought Jews in from all over and concentrated them in the ghetto, the Nazi governor didn't want the clean air of Krakow spoiled by so many Jews," he says. So the city's Jewish ghetto was smaller and more frequently culled than those in other cities. Joseph's family, like some other Krakow Jews, strove to stay and make their living there. They realized only later that it would mean living in the ghetto.

Throughout Joseph's legal struggles, he was still scrambling to help his family back in Poland. He paid for care packages from companies in neutral countries that would, for an arm and a leg,

send food and toiletries into Poland. At first, the letters from his family assured Joseph that they had enough food to be comfortable. Before long, though, the letters became detailed, desperate thank-you notes that read like inventories ("Thank you so much for the rice…the canned milk…the three ounces of tea…the five ounces of coffee…")

By the time Joseph managed to secure several expensive Nicaraguan visas for the family, it was too late—the Nazis were no longer recognizing even legitimate paperwork for Polish Jews. The letters from his family trailed off in December of 1941. Joseph's Polish wife left him and remarried, but Joseph won the right to stay in the country by enlisting in the Army. He went back to Europe in 1945 wearing an American uniform, and searched for months through concentration camp ruins and records. He picked up the trail of several of his family members and found that they were deported to Auschwitz among the last trainload of Jews whose papers did not stand up to examination.

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That day in 1986 was the first time Hollander ever saw the photographs of his family. "It only hit me later," he says, "that my father's survivor guilt was so extraordinary that he couldn't even display the photographs in our house." Many of them are included in the book *Every Day Lasts a Year: A Jewish Family's Correspondence from Poland.*

Almost every letter from the briefcase is included too, following chapters by Hollander, Browning, and sociologist Nechama Tec. The letters don't talk about politics; they mostly discuss family matters. "Everyday family difficulties continue even in terrible circumstances," Browning says. "All the things that are part of family life didn't just disappear because the Holocaust was about to happen." And even though the family had to write around the bigger issues looming over them, there's no denying the growing sense of desperation in their tone and, Browning says, "the growing strangulation that they feel as the noose tightens around them."

Reading the Hollander letters one after another is a throat-tightening experience. There's something eerie in the repetition—"We are okay." "Please don't worry about us." "We are all healthy." "We are okay."

Others are more poetic. One of the last letters reads:

> *Dearest Fóziu [Joseph],*
> *Our mail to you reminds me of our prayers to God. One never knows if they really reach Him.* e

Christopher Browning is the Frank Porter Graham Professor of History at Carolina. He's now collecting firsthand accounts of factory slave-labor during the Holocaust in Starachowice, Poland. Richard Hollander is a former television and newspaper journalist, and the author of Video Democracy: The Impact of Interactive Technology on American Politics*; he is now president of Millbrook Communications in Baltimore, Maryland.*

Rich Hollander's father Joseph never spoke of his escape from Poland. But through the family letters Joseph left behind after his death, "I was able to see my father as a young man," Rich says, "which is a really extraordinary thing."