

Every Day Lasts a Year. A Jewish Family's Correspondence from Poland

Published: 22.01.2016

Reviewed by Prof. Keith Stuart Parkes Edited by Dorothea Traupe

This volume is a paperback edition of a 2007 publication to which new elements have been added. Its subject is the experiences of a Jewish family from Kraków following German occupation in 1939, with well over half of the text devoted to letters sent by various members to Joseph (Józia) Hollander, the one person to escape the Nazis and find a new home in the United States. As a primary source, these letters are clearly a valuable research tool for anyone working in the area of Holocaust Studies, whilst having a much wider relevance, not least in an era marked by persecution and flight caused by war. The remainder of the book puts the family's experiences into wider contexts.

One of the two new elements is a speech entitled 'The Nazi mind' by Joseph Hollander delivered to his comrades shortly before the end of the war when he had returned to Europe as an American soldier. Unsurprisingly, he concentrates on the fate of the Jewish population of Poland. The other addition is a preface by the co-editor Richard S. Hollander, Joseph's son, who recounts briefly the genesis of the first edition and one consequence thereof. The son of a young boy Arnold Spitzman whom Joseph had helped to escape Europe made contact and arranged a meeting with his octogenarian father who was unstinting in his praise for Joseph.

After a brief Introduction and some acknowledgements the volume opens with a most useful list of the persons frequently mentioned, the vast majority being Joseph's correspondents. This is followed by some photographs which cannot fail to move the reader. The first substantive section is the portrait of his father by Richard Hollander. The first part tells of the discovery of the letters after his father, along with his second wife, died in a road accident. After this, following a brief account of the escape from Poland, Hollander recounts Joseph's departure from Europe to the USA, an unintended destination where he arrived without papers with his first wife and Arnold Spitzman. It was only through dogged determination that they were able to stay and thwart officialdom's attempt to deport them, a story that inevitably resonates today. American citizenship came with entry into the army.

The final parts of this biographical chapter include quotations from Joseph's letters which show the same animosity to the Germans as the speech and also recount his unsuccessful accounts to discover definitively the fate of his family. Lastly, Richard raises the question of why after the war his father kept silent about his experiences. He correctly points out that many Holocaust survivors suppressed their suffering, whilst stressing the important role of his mother, Joseph's second wife. There is no doubt of the importance of this chapter for

the volume, as it successfully brings to life the addressee of the letters to come.

Two other chapters precede the letters. The first by the distinguished historian and co-editor Christopher Browning is a concise and authoritative account of the fate of Kraków's Jews under Nazi occupation. He concentrates on the specific aspects of ghettoization in the city, before turning to what is known about the fate of the Hollander family. Only Joseph's sister Klara and her husband came close to surviving thanks to Nicaraguan papers he had obtained for them.

The second chapter by co-editor Nechama Tec, a sociologist and Holocaust scholar, begins with the situation of Jews in pre-war Poland, many of whom were victims of anti-Semitism with only a few including the Hollanders integrated into Polish society. Tec then ranges over a variety of topics relating principally to the occupation of Kraków including possibilities of escape from the ghetto and resistance. She then turns to the correspondence providing an introduction to what is to come. Finally, she considers the importance of letters in Holocaust research seeing their value but warning against too much being read into them. Tec's contextualisation of the letters is an undoubtedly useful contribution to the volume. However, it is somewhat unstructured (the comments on the historiographical significance of letters might have been better as an introduction) and contains a number of repetitions.

The letters themselves are divided into four sections. The first is entitled 'Letters without Reply: November 1939 – May 1940', a time when the family was largely uncertain about Joseph's fate with gaps of months between his communications. The second deals with the summer of 1940 under the title 'Separation Anxiety'. The letters from the remainder of 1940 form the third part. The title 'Exit Strategy' reflects Joseph's efforts to help his family escape their plight, efforts for which they show an immense gratitude. The final part which covers the letters from 1941 is entitled 'Familial Love, Penned'. They show the increasing difficulties faced as the occupiers increased pressure on the Jewish population of Kraków. This is underlined by the last four letters in the volume which reached Joseph through the agency of the Switzerland based Regine Hütschnecker, the sister of one of Joseph's brothers-in-law. In fact, the last letter is written to him by her in December 1942, informing him of his mother's death.

Regardless of the dividing up of the letters, they are marked throughout by common concerns. One is food with much reference being made to the food parcels sent by Joseph, not all of which reached their destination. Despite the gratitude shown, members of the family frequently stress, at least in the early part of their ordeal, that they have enough to eat. They appear not to want to cause too much worry. The same is true about another issue, the ability to stay in Kraków. Although the Nazis sought to reduce the Jewish population of the city, nearly all family members were able to stay despite having to move home. They are keen to stress their good fortune despite straitened circumstances.

One subject that remains generally taboo is politics. There is, for example, no reference to the invasion of the Soviet Union. References to the family's own dangerous situation are also scarce, at least until the last letters. Clearly this is because of the fear of censorship, which is alluded to. It becomes obligatory to write in German, no doubt to facilitate censorship, and for individual letters only to be written in one hand, an example of a small but spiteful regulation.

One other thing that manifests itself in many letters is the status enjoyed by Joseph. That the love of his mother, Berta, for her only son should shine through is not surprising. It is to one of her comments, made as she longs for a letter from him, that the title of the volume refers. Particularly noteworthy is the attitude shown by his sister Dola. She is separated from her husband Henek, who has moved east to the part of Poland occupied by the Soviet Union. Having found a new companion, she is on the point of divorcing Henek when news of his death arrives. Free to marry, she is apparently desperate for her brother's approval. This may be because of traditional gender roles, but one has also the impression that Joseph's stature has been enhanced by his escape and its potential to improve the family's lot.

Whilst there is no doubting the overall impact of the letters, their power is reduced by a number of translation problems. It may seem presumptuous to comment without being in possession of the original texts but if the translation does not read like normal English there is a clear problem. Because of the obligation to write in German, the language used in any case by Berta, those with knowledge of it will recognise some common mistranslations. One example is when the translation of a letter from Dola following her change of location reads: 'I am in Tarnów for three weeks now' (p.239) rather than 'I have now been in Tarnów for three weeks.' To comment on such points is not pedantry. Anything that amounts to something akin to an alienation effect is out of place in a work which invites identification with the protagonists and should underline the reader's shared humanity with innocent people destroyed by the most extreme forces of evil.

Another significant problem is the index which is extremely perfunctory. Moreover, it contains one egregious error in the list of names: 'Adolph' (sic) Hitler. What is particularly surprising is that this and other errors in the body of the text, presumably present in the original edition, have not been corrected for the republication. One would wish that Cambridge University Press, a leading academic publisher with a reputation to preserve, would have some mechanism in place to make corrections in such circumstances.

Nevertheless, despite these problems this book achieves the elusive combination of being of value to experts in the field and of interest to a wider public. As I have pointed out, it also remains highly relevant to today's world.



Citation:

Prof. Keith Stuart Parkes: Review for: Christopher R. Browning et. al. (eds.): *Every Day Lasts a Year. A Jewish Family's Correspondence from Poland*, 2014, in: <https://www.pol-int.org/en/publications/every-day-lasts-year-jewish-familys-correspondence-poland#r3658>.

<https://www.pol-int.org/en/publications/every-day-lasts-year-jewish-familys-correspondence-poland?j5Q6rewycZ5HtUDXTWpx7UZE=1&r=3658>