

Christopher R. Browning, Richard S. Hollander, Nechama Tec, eds. *Every Day Lasts a Year: A Jewish Family's Correspondence from Poland*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xxii + 286 pp. \$28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-88274-3.

Reviewed by Shelley O. Baranowski (University of Akron)
Published on H-Genocide (March, 2010)
Commissioned by Elisa G. von Joeden-Forgey



Letters from Hell

In 1986, following the untimely death of his parents in a car accident, Richard Hollander, who is currently the president of an advertising and marketing firm in Baltimore, discovered a briefcase full of neatly organized letters and postcards in his parents' attic. Written between November 1939 and December 1941, Hollander's discovery was the correspondence to his father, Joseph, from Joseph's mother Berta and his three sisters Klara Wimisner, Mania Nachtigall, and Dola Stark and their families. At the time, Joseph was struggling to avoid his and his wife's deportation from the United States as undocumented refugees, while his Polish-Jewish relatives, who remained behind in Crackow, became enmeshed in the spider web of German repression in their German-occupied homeland. Abruptly terminated after the United States entered the war, the correspondence provided few clues as to the fate of Joseph's family beyond Berta's death from natural causes in August 1942, confirmed by the sister of one of her sons-in-law. Yet Joseph's inability to trace them while serving in the U.S. Army in Germany after the war testified to the worst. They perished in the Holocaust.

As the only surviving male in his immediate family, Joseph enjoyed a prosperous career as the director of the Polish Travel Bureau before he departed his native land several months before the German invasion. As an assimilated Jew, he had received his law degree from Jagiellonian University in Crackow, and lived in an elegant flat with his wife Felicia, whom he married in 1934.

Following his flight from Poland, precipitated by his sensitivity to the virulent antisemitism in Germany in the months preceding the war, Joseph did not simply remain a titular head of his family while in exile. He became instrumental to the succor and survival of his relatives from afar, albeit temporarily. While doggedly fighting his deportation by various means (including his appeal to Eleanor Roosevelt) until his enlistment in the army granted him citizenship, Joseph shipped increasingly essential food supplies and worked tirelessly to get his family out. He actually obtained papers from the Nicaraguan consulate for one of his sisters, Klara Wimisner, her husband Dawid, and their two children, Luska and Genka, which would have allowed them to settle there. Alas, the German decision to ban Jewish emigration from the General Government—the part of Poland west of the German-Soviet demarcation line which the Germans had not annexed to the Reich—prevented the realization of this near miracle. As for Joseph, his marriage to Felicia fell apart under the stress of the couple's statelessness and fear for their families left behind. Later, after enlisting in the army, he met and married his second wife Vita, a relationship of soul mates, which, according to their son Richard, was the reason that his father could cope with the loss of his family for the remainder of his life.

In addition to Richard Hollander's chapter-length biography of his father, based partly on Joseph's own unfinished account of his life, Christopher Browning's and Nechama Tec's contributions to *Every Day Lasts a Year*

(the book's title comes from one of Berta's letters to Joseph) are essential to appreciating the significance of the Hollander family correspondence. Joseph's relatives, careful to avoid the wrath of the German censors, limited their discussions to the seemingly mundane occurrences of their daily lives and familial relationships, using code words or phrases when referring to the occupiers. Thus, Browning contextualizes the frequent, if veiled, references to the family's struggle to obtain permits to remain in Crackow after the General Government's chief administrator, Hans Frank, in an effort to Germanize the city, sought to expel most of the city's Jews to avoid the large concentrations of Jews confined in Warsaw and Łódź. Although relieved at having acquired the necessary documentation and able to exploit the peculiarities of the German occupation of the city, Hollander family members were thus trapped once Frank ordered the ghettoization of Crackow Jews in March 1941 and the sealing of the ghetto the following October. As well as describing the interwar and wartime history of Polish Jewry, Nechama Tec's chapter delineates gender distinctions and patriarchal traditions among Polish Jews that remained resilient under German rule, and even grew stronger as conditions grew harsher. Thus, much of the correspondence involves the family's appeals to Joseph as arbiter and judge in the pending divorce of his youngest sister, Dola Stark, from her husband Henek, who had fled to Soviet-occupied Galicia, and her remarriage. While sparing the family the trauma of the formal dissolution of a marriage, Henek's sudden death did not stop Dola or her new husband, Munio Blaustein, from begging for Joseph's blessing.

Yet as the combined effects of the occupation directly and indirectly undermined the authority of male Jews, the resourcefulness of women became crucial to Jewish survival. Berta assured the family's cohesion as its center on the ground. Although Joseph's brothers-in-law were fortunate to find work until the Crackow ghetto was sealed, the resourcefulness of Joseph's female relatives, a good example being his niece Lusía who became an accomplished seamstress and could thus draw an income, becomes increasingly clear in these letters. In fact, if this book is Richard Hollander's testimony to Joseph's skill and determination, and familial devotion, it is at least as powerful a witness to the strength of women he never

knew.

Accounts of Jewish eyewitnesses and survivors, whether they take the form of letters, diaries, or memoirs, tell the experiences of the exceptions to the rule of Jewish life under Nazi rule. The majority did not live to tell their stories, as the Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi noted years ago. The Hollander correspondence reinforces this point. As assimilated, well-educated, middle-class Jews who were fluent in Polish and German, the Hollanders counted as a relative rarity among Polish Jews. They could exploit their connections with non-Jews to secure their livelihoods after the aryianization of their businesses, at least for a time. Joseph's profession as head of a travel agency gave him a perspective that was sufficiently broad to allow him to see the darkening clouds in Europe, especially for Jews, and appreciate the danger that his family faced as the Third Reich's designs on Poland became increasingly evident. His training as a lawyer and his business acumen enabled him to work the system after landing in the United States to avoid deportation back to Poland, and to come close to rescuing some of his relatives. Yet for all the advantages of assimilation and social position, the odds of survival in ground zero of the Nazi *Lebensraum* project were pitifully small. To be sure, the letters that Joseph received conveyed as much optimism and gratitude for his work on their writers' behalf as they did dread, indicative of the uncertainty of their fate during the two-year lifetime of the correspondence. Indeed the value of this collection lies in its depiction of the everyday dilemmas that Jews confronted as they struggled to meet short-term needs while striving for long-term security in the face of an occupation that, however minacious, had not yet decided what the "final solution" of the "Jewish question" was to be. Moreover, there is much contemporary documentation that tells us about the worldviews, intentions, and plans of the Nazi perpetrators, but personal or communal accounts of Jews are scarce. Nevertheless, between the launching of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 and the American entry in the war in December, the Nazi regime shifted its Jewish policy from a chaotic program of expulsion, resettlement, and forced labor, to outright extermination. Among the Hollanders, only Joseph would survive.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-genocide>

Citation: Shelley O. Baranowski. Review of Browning, Christopher R.; Hollander, Richard S.; Tec, Nechama, eds., *Every Day Lasts a Year: A Jewish Family's Correspondence from Poland*. H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. March, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25403>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.