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## Students bring survivors' stories to life in original play

*Parallels are drawn to plight of today's refugees*

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In a performance of "In the Light of One Another," Miles Wilkie and Ruth Kupperberg reenact a confrontation with the "Angel of Death," Dr. Josef Mengele, in Auschwitz.



Dumar Valencia portrays Egon Salmon, a survivor of the doomed voyage of the S.S. St. Louis, whose 937 Jewish refugees were refused entry by the United States in 1939.

In 1939 Egon Salmon spent his 15th birthday on the deck of the S.S. St. Louis, watching the lights of Miami fading in the distance as he sailed back to an uncertain fate in wartorn Europe.

Salmon, his mother, and sister were among the 937 desperate Jewish refugees from Germany who embarked on the transatlantic journey in May 1939, seeking a safe port in Cuba. When they were denied entry first to Cuba and then the United States, there was no choice but to return to Europe. Holland, Belgium, France, and Great Britain agreed to accept the passengers; 254 of the passengers who disembarked in the first three of those countries lost their lives after the Nazis invaded.

"It was a horrendous experience," Salmon, now 93, told NJJN. His father had been arrested during Kristallnacht in 1938 and sent to Dachau, but was released and had escaped to Cuba, where he awaited the arrival of his family. Instead, the trio found refuge in Belgium and reunited with Salmon's father in the United States nine months later.

"We were lucky because our quota numbers came up pretty quickly," said Salmon. "Most of the people on that ship already had permission to enter the United States..., but their quota number hadn't been called."

On April 29, Salmon's story will come to life at Highland Park Conservative Temple-Congregation Anshe Emeth (HPCT-CAE) when students from Wagner College on Staten Island present "In the Light of One Another: A Meditation on Resistance Drawn from the Testimony of Survivors."

The play — presented by the Wagner College Theatre and the college's Holocaust Center — will feature 12 Wagner students who will reenact the traumatic events that shaped the lives of six Holocaust survivors from Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Germany, and Romania, based on their testimony.

The Highland Park performance is being dedicated to Salmon, a Maplewood resident, who will see the play for the first time from the audience. His son Henry, who lives in Edison, is a temple member.

For Egon Salmon, the ordeal didn't end with his family's arrival in the United States. After finishing high school on Staten Island and becoming an American citizen, he was drafted into the Army and sent back to Europe to interrogate Nazi prisoners.

"It was pretty traumatic for him and my grandparents," said Henry Salmon. "My grandfather fought under the kaiser [during World War I]. He thought that would protect him and his family, but they didn't care that he was a combat veteran."

The play was written by Lori Weintrob, director of Wagner's Holocaust Education and Programming Center, and Obie Award-winning playwright Martin Moran. David Dabbon composed music for the play, and Theresa McCarthy directed.

Written as "a meditation on resistance," the work was inspired by Elie Wiesel's first play, "A Black Canopy, A Black Sky," produced by Hadassah of New Jersey in 1968 to mark the 25th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. "In the Light of One Another" takes place at a Passover seder, where students and survivors come together, a scenario meant to recall the first night of the uprising.

A grant from the Leonard B. Kahn Foundation allowed Wagner College to bring the play to HPCT-CAE and to Congregation B'nai Israel in Basking Ridge on April 8.

Weintrob told NJN that the student actors worked with the survivors, striving to adopt their accents, gestures, and even breathing patterns.

"They literally become the embodiment of the survivors," she said. "They walk in their shoes and carry their message beautifully. It's not just Jewish students, but African-American students, students of other faiths.

"There are stories of surviving Kristallnacht, the Warsaw Ghetto," she continued. "We have the story of a woman who smuggled a gun into the ghetto and later, at age 17, came face to face with [Josef] Mengele," the physician and SS officer infamous for his inhumane medical experiments on prisoners in Auschwitz.

Two of the survivors depicted were interned in Auschwitz; another was a partisan who killed two Nazis and helped 57 other Jews escape.

"These college students not only recreate the arc of the Holocaust, but also recreate the legacy of the survivors, building on their youth and resistance," said Weintrob, adding that resistance was enacted not only through physical battles, "but by standing up to the Nazis' inhumanity and anti-Semitism."

The play incorporates music and songs in English, Hebrew, and Yiddish, including two original songs, said Weintrob. During one performance, cast members were singing "Zog nit keyn mol," Yiddish for the "Partisan Song," and, according to Weintrob, "survivors stood up and began singing with them."

Besides Salmon, the play is also dedicated to the women of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, Weintrob said, noting that in the battle, "about half the fighters were women."

Bethany Friedman, a freshman arts administration major from Manalapan, portrays Hannah Steiner, who was an inmate of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, as well as

survivor Romi Cohn. Friedman said that while a student of Weintrob she interviewed Steiner and was fascinated by her “love story” — Steiner and her boyfriend were separated by the war at age 15 and reunited and married seven years later; and she and her mother were able to stay together through internment in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen.

Friedman said she was inspired to learn more about the Holocaust and found contrasts between then and now. “Today we stand up and defend each other and are not bystanders,” she said. “We sing a song about rising up that is meaningful to today, when there is still anti-Semitism and...different groups are being oppressed.”

Friedman said the reaction of survivors and others to the play “has helped move the story forward and get the message out to keep rising up.”

Elizabeth Schoenfeld of Jackson, also a freshman arts administration major, has a personal connection to the Holocaust; her maternal grandparents and her paternal great-grandparents were survivors. Other family members perished in the Sobibor extermination camp. She plays Salmon and Gabi Held, a Hungarian survivor imprisoned in Bergen-Belsen.

“The play really helped connect me to my heritage,” said Schoenfeld. “I’ve felt very disconnected the last couple of years. My grandfather died several years ago, and my grandmother never liked to talk about it.”

However, Schoenfeld said, now that she has seen the play her grandmother is finally willing to speak about her experience during the war.

“It’s amazing to see the change,” Schoenfeld said. “She has grandchildren and several great-grandchildren, and she now realizes it’s important to share her story with them.”

Dumar Valencia, a freshman theater performance major from Maryland who plays Salmon while he is aboard the St. Louis (various students portrayed the same survivor at different points in their lives), said he got involved in the play because “it is important to let people know what it was like to live in that era. Right now, we need to stand up and not stay silent, because if we stay silent we have seen what happens.”

Valencia has also taken courses with Weintrob. Hearing the survivors’ testimony enabled him to visualize their suffering, he said, and he is troubled that others around the world are facing death and persecution with nowhere to turn.

“It’s just a repeat of what happened in the past,” he said.

Egon Salmon agrees. The play is an “awakening” to those “who think it’s not important to save people who have to leave their homeland and go to another land to live safely,” he said. He pointed to the plight of refugees fleeing Syria and other places who are being denied entry in America and elsewhere.

“Nothing has really changed,” said Salmon. “The world still operates the same way, only to a much smaller degree.”