

Living Memories

An original play brings a dark chapter in French history to light. | BY INEZ HEDGES

"After being registered, each new arrival is assigned to a room off one of the six staircases. . . . There are supposed to be 50 persons to a room, but we were 72, and I saw rooms with up to 120 persons; in those cases, many of them sleep on a straw mat on the floor. The beds are strewn with suitcases, packages, fur coats, dresses suspended from walls or from the beds on hangers, all kinds of washing hang from clotheslines, pots and pans are heaped onto rusty garden furniture next to makeup and jars of jam."

— from *Children of Drancy*

Can art help us comprehend the Holocaust? Auschwitz's horror made it impossible to write poetry, the philosopher Theodor Adorno said. And yet he believed, paradoxically, that the only true expressions of Holocaust suffering could come through art.

Generations of artists have tried to capture the Holocaust's immensity by creating a "living memory" of the Shoah—trying to instill a deep understanding of, even an identification with, those sorrowful experiences.

Architects do this. Daniel Liebeskind designed the exterior of the Jewish Museum in Berlin to look like a compressed, distorted Star of David. Inside, sharp-edged shafts of light from the museum's asymmetrical windows pierce the space, conveying a sense of fragmentation. A Holocaust Tower, a narrow room several stories high, is lit by one small window near the ceiling; the height makes the light seem unattainable. The historical fissure of the Holocaust, the building's elements say, will forever mark our present.

Painters, novelists, musicians, and sculptors do this, too. And, not long ago, I found myself trying to create my own living memory by writing a play, *Children of Drancy*. My inspiration came from one of the darkest chapters in French history.

In August 1941, a prison camp was opened in Drancy, a suburb north of



MARK CATALANO

Paris. Its purpose was to hold interned French Jews. Most of the internees would later be deported to extermination camps like Auschwitz. Before France was liberated by the Allies in 1944, the pro-German Vichy government sent nearly 76,000 Jews—including 11,400 children—to the extermination camps. Only 3 percent survived.

Drancy was a crushingly overcrowded, chaotic, terrifying place. Many children said good-bye to their parents there. Thousands more arrived

without their parents, who had already been sent to the death camps.

"In September 1941, meals were served in trashcans, and internees were seen searching through garbage to find hearts of cabbage or the peelings from cucumbers and squash. At this time, the daily ration was one-seventh of a loaf of bread per person, one soup ladle of water, and three pieces of carrot."

— from *Children of Drancy*

Many sources describe the experiences of the Drancy prisoners: documentary films, filmed testimonials, letters in the Jewish Study Center archives in Paris, drawings smuggled out of the camp, and firsthand accounts published shortly after the end of World War II.

As I was researching the play, what struck me most forcibly were the individual voices of the children, women, and men. Drawn entirely from firsthand accounts, *Children of Drancy* became a story of bravery, optimism, and self-sacrifice in the face of insurmountable odds.

The voices include that of René Blum, the director of the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo and brother of a former prime minister of France. Blum perished in Auschwitz after being deported from Drancy. Also quoted are the letters and poetry of Max Jacob, a renowned French poet and close friend of Pablo Picasso who died at Drancy a few days after arriving there.

Last fall, in six sold-out performances at the Curry Student Center's Studio Theatre, my play came to life, directed by associate theatre professor Nancy Kindelan and acted by an ensemble of nine Northeastern theatre majors. The actors conducted their own Holocaust research to fully understand the words of the real people they portrayed.

The walls of the theatre were painted black and inscribed with reproductions of graffiti and messages found at the camp when it was liberated. Theatre major Jaime Schrank designed the stage set, which included a model of the kind of boxcar used in the deportations. (At the Drancy site today, one of the actual boxcars has been installed as a memorial. The camp building itself is now a low-income apartment complex.)

Like Berlin's Jewish Museum, the text of the play is fragmented, a montage of voices stitched together. In an inspired bit of stagecraft, a young woman dancer—expressing emotion through movement—was used to connect the individual scenes.

On the play's opening night, the French consulate's press attaché was in the audience. And when the Boston Jewish Film Festival devoted space in

their promotional materials to publicizing the play, it was clear we had put together something bigger than a typical campus event.

"The Nazi period came close to taking all of humanity with it into the darkness. I hold that the only way to dissipate this darkness is to illuminate it with the stark light of truth, without exaggerating anything."

— from *Children of Drancy*

After fragmentation, synthesis. Every performance of *Children of Drancy* was followed by a discussion between the audience and the actors, led by a Northeastern professor.

The professors leading the discussion uncovered slightly different perspectives each night. Assistant history professor Gerald Herman looked at the historical

studies course on video production; and a one-credit course for all freshmen honors students, who were asked to read the play and write an essay on how studying the Holocaust has enlarged their awareness of contemporary conflicts. Graduate students in a history seminar on war and genocide also attended the play.

Two years ago, when I was named Stotsky Professor of Jewish Historical and Cultural Studies, I decided to use my term to explore how art can communicate a living memory of the Shoah. So far, my research has taken me to archives and memorial sites in Paris, Berlin, and Washington, D.C.

Along the way, I've met Serge and Beate Klarsfeld, a husband-and-wife team who have spent decades trying to bring former Nazis to justice and memorialize Holocaust victims. I've made

The walls of the theatre were painted black and inscribed with reproductions of graffiti and messages found at the camp when it was liberated. The stage set included a model of the kind of boxcar used in the deportations. (At the Drancy site today, one of the actual boxcars has been installed as a memorial.)

underpinnings of the Holocaust. Political science professor William F. S. Miles discussed the politics of the period. Associate professor of religious studies Susan Setta shared insight into philosophers' and theologians' views on the Holocaust.

Audience members were able to ask the professor and the actors questions, or offer their observations. The actors talked about the challenges of playing their multiple roles.

Even before the curtain went up on the first performance, an advanced learning community had been organized at Northeastern around the play's production, allowing a diverse group of students to study the Holocaust together and learn from one another.

Four undergraduate classes read or attended the play: a theatre course on script analysis; a modern-languages course on French film during the German occupation of France; a cinema-

friends with French filmmakers Marcel Bluwal, who directed the first feature film with a scene set in the Drancy camp, and Cécile Clairval-Milhaud, who directed a full-length documentary on the French concentration camps.

Working on *Children of Drancy* and using it to teach people about the Holocaust has been an intense and exhilarating experience. I've discovered just how fully the arts can entice students—and the world—to consider the critical issues of our times.



Inez Hedges is the Stotsky Professor of Jewish Historical and Cultural Studies for 2006–2009, and a professor of French, German, and cinema studies in Arts and Sciences.