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## A Shoah play, decades in the making

From a Nazi camp to a Harvard stage  
By Elise Kigner Advocate Staff



Director Dr. Guila Clara Kessous and survivor Henry Newman. In 1943, Henry Newman was a prisoner at a labor camp in Budzyn, Poland. Knowing he had studied theater, the camp's commandant asked the 21-year-old to stage a play with prisoners as the actors. There was one more thing: The play better make him laugh; Newman's life depended on it.

"I'll tell you what I want to do. I want a little humor in this camp, real humor, Jewish humor, so I want you to stage a show, and it better be good," the commandant told Newman. "Make us all laugh and if you don't, I'll hang you upside down."

What happened next? You'll have to see the play about the play, "Budzyn," which premieres with a single performance May 6 at Harvard University's Sanders Theatre.

Decades after the war, Newman, now 88 and living in New Castle, N.Y., penned his recollections of the camp in a 20-page manuscript. It wound up in the hands of Boston area director and producer Dr. Guila Clara Kessous. May 6 was chosen for the premiere as it is the World Day of Prayer.



The performance, hosted by Harvard Hillel, includes music, dance and prayer.

During the prologue, the audience will sit in the dark and listen to the recorded voices of Holocaust survivors speaking in the varied languages of their concentration camps. The last voice will be that of Newman:

"My name is Henry S. Newman and this is my life story: An incident that happened to me and everything there is true. This is not a fiction play. Remember that."

Irving Fine Society Singers & Ensemble will perform music by Edwin Geist, himself a victim of the Holocaust, as dancers portray a swastika and the letters of G-d's name, and reach out to the audience. Thanks in part to his musical talent, Geist was released from a concentration camp and managed to get his wife freed as well. But months later, he was rearrested and shot; his wife, Lyda, then committed suicide.

Geist's niece, Holocaust survivor Rosian Zerner of Newton, and her son, Lang, are also participating in the performance.

"I don't want to make a narrative of suffering," Kessous said. "I want to force each artistic expression to be another media to transmit the Shoah."

The play opens with an older Newman writing a memoir about Budzyn. It then shifts to Passover in the Warsaw Ghetto. Henry Newman and his brother, Benjamin, are transported to Budzyn.

In his manuscript, Newman wrote that 12 prisoners were hanged the night before his camp play was to premiere. Kessous symbolizes this with four people dancing to a Yiddish song about a pogrom, "The Shtetl is Burning."

The play concludes with a memorial service led by Zerner, commemorating the victims of the Holocaust. It will also include a remembrance of Poland's top leaders who were killed in a plane crash on their way to a service at the site of a World War II Russian massacre of Polish officers.

Participating are Cambridge Mayor David Maher; Lori Gross, Harvard associate provost for Arts and Culture; Rick Mann, president of the New England Holocaust Memorial; Marek Lesniewski-Laas, Poland's honorary consul; and Rony Yedidia, Israel's deputy consul general to New England.

"[Prayers] will be said, not to Gd, but to us," said Kessous, who is Modern Orthodox. "That is why I am doing this on the World Day of Prayer. The first thing we need to pray for is respect among each other, and praying for the way that we treat each other."

Kessous, a native of France, received a doctorate at Boston University two years ago under the mentorship of Elie Wiesel. She has directed and produced two works by Wiesel in Boston: "Once Upon a Time" and "The Trial of God." Kessous is working on a post-doctorate at Harvard University's Center for European Studies on theater and human rights. She was recently nominated as Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French government.

Under the direction of Kessous, Harvard senior Vanda Gyuris adapted the manuscript, and sophomore Betty Rosen served as the assistant director. The dances were choreographed by Cherina Carmel Eisenberg, an artist and a fifthgrade teacher at Temple Israel of Boston. The music is conducted by Nicholas Alexander Brown, director and founder of The Irving Fine Society Singers & Ensemble.

Newman said he acted as "director of the director," consulting by phone with Kessous through the production process.

Newman addressed the show's crew through a video message: "You're working for a terrific director. Trust her. Follow her lead, and I promise you you'll get the greatest satisfaction of your life. And this is one show that you will never forget. This is my promise."

The play covers only a small part of Newman's experiences during the Holocaust. He participated in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and was imprisoned in several camps, Budzyn being the first. When he was liberated from Dachau, he weighed 91 pounds. He was the only member left of his family.

In 1998, Newman published "Unwanted Journey," a book about adapting to life in America.

Kessous said she changes her approach to directing when she does a Holocaust play. She tells the actors that they should not even attempt to put themselves in the shoes of camp inmates. "We need to be extremely humble when we come onstage, when we are touching the Shoah," Kessous said. "No matter what we think, no matter all our efforts, we will never experience the pain they had."

To recruit actors, the director met the greater Boston chapter of the World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust.

Isaac Jack Trompetter, 68, plays the part of Newman as an older adult. He sits on stage during the show, writing about the Holocaust. Trompetter was four months old when his parents hid him with elderly Christian fundamentalist farmers in the Netherlands. Of the period, he recalled only being rushed into a closet, where he rocked on a hobby horse and listened to bombing. He was 3 when he was reunited with his parents at war's end.

Trompetter has yet to meet Newman, though he has seen a video of him and read about Budzyn. At the play, he hopes they'll meet. "He'll be sitting in the audience, and I'll be looking at him as I do my very brief lines."

*"Budzyn," May 6 at 8 p.m. at Harvard University's Sanders Theatre. Call 617-496-2222 or visit [www.budzyntheplay.com](http://www.budzyntheplay.com).*

[http://www.thejewishadvocate.com/news/2010-04-30/Top\\_News/A\\_Shoah\\_play\\_decades\\_in\\_the\\_making.html](http://www.thejewishadvocate.com/news/2010-04-30/Top_News/A_Shoah_play_decades_in_the_making.html)