

JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

Rediscovering a Family's Roots in New Play

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Andrea Stolowitz had been to Berlin before, but she returned in 2015 for a different reason.

She was looking for her family — or where in the city her family used to live.

It was part of her journey as she was writing her new play, *Schlueterstrasse 27*, which will be presented by PlayPenn, a new play development organization, with a free reading at the National Museum of American Jewish History at 7 p.m. on May 16.

The play centers around a woman — Stolowitz herself, in this case — tracing her family's roots and history in Berlin after discovering her grandfather's diary at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Stolowitz grew up in New York before moving to Portland, Ore. She began her college career as a Russian literature major and studied abroad in Moscow in the early 1990s. There she fell in love with the theater scene.

She went to see plays all the time as tickets were cheap.

“I kept going to the theater and I kept thinking, ‘Wow, I want to do this, I don’t want to be a Russian lit major,’” she recalled.

At 21, she considered herself already “too old” to be an actor, she said with a laugh. But it did get her thinking about playwriting or directing. Following that passion, she transferred to Barnard College and later got her MFA in playwriting from University of California-San Diego.

Since then, she has written six award-winning plays that have been performed nationally.

Schlueterstrasse 27, however — the street her great-grandfather lived on — is a departure from her other plays, not only because it's the first directly autobiographical work she's done, but because she's a character in it.

She also doesn't usually work off of a document that has importance to her family, she added.

“What became clear was the interesting part of the story was my trying to find these things out, not necessarily what’s in the diary,” she said. “It ended up being that I’m a character in my own play, which is kind of hilariously theatrical.”

Backing up to 1936, her great-grandfather, a doctor, escaped Berlin and he and his family settled in New York City between 1936 and 1939. He then started a diary , half in German, half in English.

Stolowitz’s mother had the diary for a long time, and it kept “bopping” around between relatives until eventually her mother donated it to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

“The archivist there sent me a full-scan color copy that I put on my shelf for 10 years and never opened,” she said.

Then, her husband, a professor, was taking a sabbatical year, and they went to Berlin. She started to think about what she could do while they were there.

She thought of her own family history.

“Their whole narrative was they were fleeing their country and had kids in America,” she said, adding her great-grandmother also escaped. She began thinking about how later generation of survivors fared.

“It became interesting to me to see how much of that was at play in my family. I wanted to know what in this weird way — are we crazy because of the Holocaust or would we be crazy anyway? And I say crazy lightly and jokingly.”

Once she got to thinking about that aspect of her family, she came up with an idea of what to do in Berlin.

“I thought, ‘Well, I’m going to Berlin, my great-grandfather is from Berlin, he started this diary in 1939 in New York for his grandchildren, he knew he would have grandchildren in the U.S.,’” she said, adding why the diary switches to English. “I thought, well, let me take this diary and use archives in Berlin to figure out more about this story — whatever the story is. I wrote some proposals and got some grants, and off we went.”

He wrote the diary from 1939 to 1948, and Stolowitz began discovering more about her family she wasn’t even sure her family knew about, such as cousins her great-grandfather had in Berlin who perished in the Holocaust. She got address books and went around to the houses to try and figure out who lived there.

She worked with archivists who found original documents, including applications for restitution for loss of property and even her great-grandfather’s will. She reviewed these documents determining what should be put in the play and used the diary as a resource.

“It’s not a historical document that he creates to narrate history — it’s basically bedtime stories for his grandchildren,” she said.

She also had to remember the diary was not objective, as it was his perspective on things, but used that along with other resources, such as her family, to shape the story.

“The mission of the play is to kind of find everyone who is lost and finding them,” she said. “If they lived, where did they go? Are they family, and what does that mean?”

Her character’s journey in the play of discovering her family parallels that of her great-grandfather writing the diary and discovering what their family’s future is in their new surroundings.

Putting her family in the play was complicated, just as it was for her to include herself.

She wanted to make the play the story of her family specifically, and make it different.

“Part of the things I felt like were hard about this play is in some way writing about the Holocaust because it is very easy to make that story a story we already all know,” she said. “This is a play about people who are changed by history because they have to flee, and this is what happens three generations later.”

She is hoping the play will help the audience think differently about survival.

“Just because you’re lucky to have survived and didn’t go to the camps doesn’t mean that nothing happened to you, and I feel like that recognition is important because it really shapes a lot of family dynamic,” she said, including her own. “It’s part of the experience, it’s a big experience and nobody’s experience of the experience should be not counted.”

The play will make its world premiere at the English Theatre Berlin in October.

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