



the JEWISH VOICE

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URI Feinstein Providence Campus Arts & Culture Program and
First Hand Theatrical present



THIS IS My STORY: MAYSES - 1938-1948

April 7-9, 7:30pm, April 10, 2pm, 2016

a new play created by Kevin Olson, directed by Frank V. Toti Jr.

Written from first-hand accounts, *This is My Story: MAYSES, 1938-1948* presents glimpses of the lives of 12 Jewish individuals from across the globe, who experienced the different yet often interconnected events taking place between 1938 and 1948. *MAYSES* is the Yiddish word for stories. None of these *MAYSES* are concentration camp narratives. They speak of other experiences from those years that also continue to impact and shape the lives of both Jews and non-Jews today. Among these stories are: experiences in the Kindertransport, working in the underground, the attack on Pearl Harbor, dropping of the A-Bomb in Japan, Internment in Shanghai, Japanese-American Internment in the USA, and liberation from the Ludwigslust Concentration Camp to the founding of Israel. As such, *this production presents primary source material on alternative subjects connected to World History during the Second World War.*

The play will be performed by Lilly Cataldi, Chuck Lafond, Steven Pennell and Michèle Bourget Rogers. The performance will feature original music by Eric van Dervort, media designed by Adam O'Brien, and lighting design by Marc Tiberis II.

URI Feinstein Providence Campus - Paff Auditorium
80 Washington St, Providence, RI 02903

For information call 401-277-5206 uri.artsandculture@gmail.com or visit web.uri.edu/prov/arts
All events are FREE and open to the public.

URI FEINSTEIN PROVIDENCE CAMPUS ARTS AND CULTURE PROGRAM &
FIRST HAND THEATRICAL Present

THIS IS MY STORY: MAYSES 1938 – 1948

By Kevin Olson

(Characters in order of appearance)

Chapter 1: Miriam Ron, Laura Margolis, Leonid Shekhtman

Chapter 2: Schlomo Hillel, Malka Goodman, Ester Golan

Chapter 3: Dina Pronicheva

Chapter 4: Ed Goldberg, Rabbi H. Cerf Straus

Chapter 5: Elaine Black Yoneda, Jacob Beser, Harold Silverberg

Cast

Lilly Cataldi Miriam Ron, Malka Goodman, Dina Pronicheva

Charles Lafond Schlomo Hillel, Ed Goldberg, Jacob Beser

Steven Pennell Leonid Shekhtman, Rabbi H. Cerf Straus, Harold Silverberg

Michèle Rogers Laura Margolis, Ester Golan, Elaine Black Yoneda

Productions Staff

Steven Pennell Producer

Frank V. Toti Jr. Director

Patricia Hawkrige Dialect Coach

Adam O'Brien Projection and Media Design

Marc Tiberiis II Lighting Design and Running Crew

Eric Vandervort Music Design

Dennis Champlain Graphic Design

Zena Fernandes Office Management

Lilly Cataldi is a member of Actors Equity since 1972 and has enjoyed working in the performing arts as a performer, director, choreographer and educator. Her experiences run the gamut from National Tours and Regional Theatre to Children's Theatre Companies and Community Theatres. An accomplished vocalist, Lilly has performed in many nightclubs and cabarets, most notably with pianist Bobby Peace. She maintains a local studio as a vocal instructor and acting coach. Lilly holds a degree from Salve Regina University.

Charles Lafond: Charles studied theatre performance at Rhode Island College and works as the General Manager at 2nd Story Theatre in Warren, RI. Some previous roles include: Don, *Butterflies Are Free*; Jason, *Medea*; Marsden, *And Then There Were None*; Gary, *I Hate Hamlet*; and of course the previous works with Frank And Steven in Tour and revival productions of *The Journey Out* and *Talking to Plants*. During the briefs moments he's away from theatre he enjoys building Lego with Mr E.A. and watching TV with Mr. Jake the Cat.

Steven Pennell is the Coordinator of the URI Providence Campus Urban Arts and Culture Program. He has degrees from RIC, NYU and OSU in Theatre. It has been his pleasure to work as an arts administrator, theatre director, designer and educator for the past 40 years. He is committed to giving voice to social justice issues and to underserved, under recognized individuals especially

through oral history based performance works. It is an honor to bring these 12 people to life. It is also a pleasure to work with this dynamic, talented group of artists. Special thanks to my husband/co-creator Frank.

Michèle Rogers is thankful to be involved in this production. She has a BA in Theatre from Rhode Island College. She has performed in numerous productions in RI, MA, and CT. She has been on this stage most recently in "We Served Too!" and "Trust In The Journey". This play depicts a different view of the world during and after WWII. She is proud to be able to share the stories of these women. Thanks to Frank and Steven for this opportunity. This was a challenging, but fun process working with my fellow cast mates. She would also like to thank her husband Mark and son Jake for their tolerance and continued support

Kevin Olson is a director and playwright. He established First Hand Theatrical in 2013 and has created two original scripts for the company – *Interrupting The Sermon* and *This Is My Story: MAYSES, 1938-1948*. First Hand Theatrical creates original theater productions using primary source material drawn mainly from diverse cultural and social histories. Kevin moved to Cranston, Rhode Island from St. Paul, Minnesota in 2005. Kevin holds a M.F.A. in Theatre Directing from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Currently, he serves as Adjunct Faculty at the University of Rhode Island (URI), Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) and New England Institute of Technology (NEIT) teaching courses in Theater, Film and Communication.

Frank V. Toti Jr. holds an M.A. in History from Catholic University and an M.F.A. in Theatre and Society from Rhode Island College. In addition to teaching on the Adjunct Faculty of Johnson and Wales University, Roger Williams University and Rhode Island College, Frank is an actor, director, dramaturge and playwright. He has written more than ten original plays, including his one person play, *Baggage* and five oral history plays: *We Served Too!* (about WWII Women Veterans), *Trust in the Journey* (about two hidden children during the Holocaust) and *The Journey Out* (about older LGBTQ in Rhode Island) among them, all produced by the URI Providence Campus Urban Arts and Culture Program.

Director's Note: *This Is My Story: Mayses 1938-1948* is a powerful and moving play, written and adapted by Kevin Olson, beautifully detailing the lives of twelve Jewish women and men before, during and after World War II. Spanning the globe – Iraq, China, America, Russia, Germany and Israel – 'Mayses' provides a dramatic vision of the Jewish experience during those years. My heartfelt thanks to all involved in this production; to Kevin for his generosity in allowing us total freedom in exploring the text; to the brilliant design team whose creativity helped fashion the world of the play; to an amazing ensemble of actors whose talents, humanity and heart truly honors the lives and stories of these amazing people; and to my husband, thanks, thanks and ever thanks for the joy of working together. NAMASTE

Musical selections for the production: Traditional Iraqi folk song - Ali Sabah ensemble, *Russian Sher* Daniel Hoffman Kelzmer Fiddle, *A Sephardic Melody*, Hine Ma Tov-traditional Israeli song, *Song of Remembrance* composed by Alexander Tcherepnin, Sonia Wieder-Atherton cello, *Avinu Malkeinu* (Our Father, Our King), *Hatikavah* (The Hope) The National Anthem of Israel, *Kol Nidrei* composed by Max Bruch, Teodora Miteva – cello, *Fanfare for the Common Man*- Aaron Copland, *Appalachian Spring*- Aaron Copland. Special thanks to Dr. Michael Bharer for his advice on these selections.

How did these and countless other wartime experiences connect to each other? And taken together could they teach us anything new about Jewish history, identity and community? After all, these years forever changed Jewish life as they changed the lives and societies of so many people around the world.

I began a search for first-hand accounts about living through these years that were less familiar than the more generally well known accounts from concentration camp survivors. Perhaps with that focus, new connections among Jews who experienced these years in different ways might emerge.

Not everything you will hear is unique to Jewish experience. Through oral histories, trips to libraries, email inquiries, testimony and family archives, I uncovered stories and reflections that seemed to reverberate one to the other in the pairing and sharing. And new connections did emerge in ways that surprised and hit close to home.

And maybe that is why we keep telling stories; always hoping to learn something about ourselves and to uncover new connections. From these years are billions of stories, told and untold, from millions of people. You will hear from 12 of them.

I am humbled that this talented group of theater artists has given so much of themselves to bring the extraordinary people you are about to meet to life. Thanks to producer (and actor) Steven Pennell who has shepherded this piece to fruition since its initial staged reading in 2014. And special thanks to Frank Toti for putting these stories on stage and for structuring them so they might resonate even more one to the other.

Kevin Olson

Character Epilogue:

Laura Margolis Rather than remain captive in the internment camp near Shanghai, Laura Margolis faked illness in order to be sent to a hospital. From the hospital, she arranged an illegal passage on a ship out of Shanghai. She successfully smuggled out records of her work in Shanghai by placing them in her underwear and on pieces of toilet paper. After returning to the U.S., she asked the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to send her to Europe. When the Joint posted her to France, she became the first woman appointed to the position of Country Director.

Miriam Ron Miriam and her family sat out the war in France as refugees and then made their way to Israel. On the 50th anniversary of Kristallnacht, Miriam Ron returned to Germany for the first time. She met with a class of 14-year old girls. One asked her if she and her classmates should feel guilty. Miriam told them rather than feel guilty, they had a special responsibility to not to be racist.

Leonid Shecktman After the war, Leonid Shecktman stayed in the Far East living on Sakhalin Island off the Pacific coast, working as a high-level government accountant. He immigrated to Brooklyn in 1994 to be with his daughter and her family. He was in his early 80s. In Brooklyn, he played soccer and delivered newspapers.

Shlomo Hillel in 1950, negotiated the mass emigration of over 120,000 Iraqi Jews who were airlifted to Israel between 1950-52. Once again, Iran played a pivotal role. Shlomo Hillel went on to serve as Speaker of the Israeli Knesset. In 1988 he was awarded the Israel Prize for outstanding service to his country.

Dr. Malka Goodman attended The Reali School in Haifa where military-style training became compulsory for girls in 1937. The Reali students were incorporated as a separate platoon within the Haganah. The man she saw kidnapped turned out to be her boyfriend's older brother, Akiva. After his release, he left for the U.S. and never came back to Israel. Dr. Goodman lives in St. Paul, Minnesota and continues to be a passionate advocate for Israel

Ester Golan published the letters her mother wrote to her in Scotland. Ester has written and lectured extensively on how losing a mother affects adolescent girls. She has been active in "The Compassionate Listening Project" and with "The Interfaith Encounter Association" working on promoting peace in the Middle East through interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural study.

Dina Pronicheva After escaping Babi Yar, Dina sought assistance at a nearby cottage. She was turned over to the Nazis, but managed to escape - again. Her non-Jewish husband was arrested and ultimately died in jail. Friends of the

family placed Dina's 2 children in an orphanage on the assumption that Dina had also died. She found her children in 1944. Dina Pronicheva testified at the Nuremberg Trials

Ed Goldberg was drafted into the army while a student at New York University. He was granted enough credits so he could graduate before heading off to basic training. He met Natalie, a distant cousin, right before heading overseas. They corresponded during his captivity and married shortly after his release. His father was Joseph Goldberg, the long-time Director of the Brooklyn Jewish Center on Eastern Parkway.

Rabbi H. Cerf Straus donated his Shepherd's Crook emblem to the Naval Academy Museum in Annapolis. He was the only Jewish Navy Chaplain to ever wear that emblem. In 1934 as Rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel in San Diego, he gave a fiery speech warning the city about "The Silver Shirts," an anti-Semitic group modeled after Nazi storm troopers. His speech convinced local law enforcement to monitor the group closely and at least in San Diego, The Silver Shirts faded away. In the late 1950s, he served as the Head of New Mexico Civil Air Defense's Religious Affairs Council whose job was to help people to overcome hysteria and panic in case of attack.

Elaine Black Yoneda was a prominent member of the American Communist Party. She testified before Congress in the hearings that resulted in reparations to Japanese-Americans interned during World War II. Karl's father died before the War but his mother remained in Hiroshima and survived the bombing. In 1960, all the Yonedas attended a nuclear disarmament conference together in Tokyo.

Lieutenant Jacob Beser The day after Pearl Harbor, Lt. Jacob Beser dropped out of the mechanical engineering program at Johns Hopkins to enlist in the Army Air Forces. He was sent to Los Alamos to work on The Manhattan Project and was assigned to a team formed to calibrate a new bomb. He was never told what kind of bomb it was although he had his suspicions. Following the war, Lt. Beser held several leadership positions in the Baltimore Jewish community. He spoke often about Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Harold Silverberg Harold's infantry unit liberated the Ludwigslust Concentration Camp on May 8, 1945. His letters home from the war have been archived by his granddaughter Johanna. His journal entry about his friend Johnny's death was shared with Johnny's family in 2012. Until then, Johnny's family had known nothing about how Johnny died or anything about his service in the War.

What is this play anyway?

Mayses is Yiddish for incredible stories. Influenced by first-hand accounts, "This is My Story: Mayses, 1938-1948" presents glimpses of the lives of 12 Jews whose lives were shaped in part by their different yet somehow interconnected experiences of those years.

None of these *mayses* are set in concentration camps. They speak of and reflect on other encounters from those years that continue to impact the lives of both Jews and non-Jews today.

The creation of this play began one Sunday afternoon sometime in the mid-1990s at the Jewish Community Center (JCC) in St. Paul, Minnesota where I worked. That Sunday we sponsored a festival showcasing the culture and personal histories of the many Jews from the former Soviet Union who had come to St. Paul. We called them New Americans.

What moved me so that day was the pride on the faces of the elderly men and women as they displayed the medals and ribbons they earned while serving in the Soviet Red Army fighting for Stalin against the Nazis in World War II. Jews who fought for Stalin -- how fascinating.

I wondered if these Jewish-Soviet World War II Vets ever talked to the Jewish-American World War II Vets who also walked the hallways of the JCC every day. But from what I observed, they brushed by each other. Sure, language was an issue but still, they were likely connected in more ways than they were aware of.

And then another thought -- there was one person in the JCC most days who had lived in British Mandate Palestine fighting for a Jewish homeland during these same years.