Documenting the Holocaust in letters

The story of a non-Jewish woman who acted as go-between for Jewish families torn by war.

Judy Maltz

Elisabeth Luz was a childless, middle-aged Protestant woman living on her own in the small town of Stafa, outside Zurich, when World War II erupted. But thanks to her efforts, hundreds of Jewish families separated during the Holocaust were able to stay in touch.

A cache of 3,000 letters discovered in her home, written by Jewish parents and children during and after the war, is the subject of a new, ambitious research project undertaken by the distinguished Holocaust historian Deborah Dwork, director of the Strasser Center on Holocaust & Genocide Studies at Clark University, in Worcester, Massachusetts.

This treasure trove, which now sits in Dwork's office, includes letters exchanged between parents living in Germany and Austria and the children they had sent to presumed safety in Belgium, England and France, as well as Luz's own correspondences with these parents and children.

Because of severe wartime postal restriction, these parents and children were unable to correspond with one another directly by mail. Taking advantage of her location in neutral Switzerland, Luz was able to serve as a go-between for them. She copied in her own handwriting each of the letters exchanged between the parents and the children and mailed them off, rather than the originals, to bypass the censor. The originals were stashed in a box in her home.

“She started out as a go-between but eventually she also became a confidante for these parents and children, who at some point began writing directly to her,” said Dwork, in an interview during a recent trip to Israel.

About 15 years ago, the box of letters was discovered by Luz's nephew while he was cleaning up her home after she died. He subsequently contacted Dwork, whom he knew as the author of “Children With a Star,” the first comprehensive study of Jewish children during the Holocaust. Published in 1991, it eventually served as the basis of a CBC documentary.

“People came to me they didn't want to throw away the letters and wanted to know if I could use them,” she recounts.

Fortunately for Dwork, most of the letters were in relatively good shape, but it did take several years to have them all scanned. She estimates that 300 Jewish families made use of Luz's services during the Holocaust to correspond with their loved ones. The cache contains letters written as early as 1940 and spanning the war years and after. “The common theme of these letters was love — this endless yearning of parents for children and children for their parents. And of course, they all talk about seeing each other again.”

When corresponding with their children, the parents tended to refrain from mentioning the hardships they were experiencing, notes Dwork, but when writing directly to Luz, they were more inclined to let down their guard. “There was even one case of a woman in the Riga ghetto, who we can assume was fearful of deportation and suffering from hunger, but she never mentioned that in the letter to her children. All she wrote was that it was her wedding anniversary and the best gift she could imagine getting would be a letter from them.”

The tentative title of her book is “Dear Tante Elisabeth,” as that is how the children addressed her in their letters. Many of those who survived stayed in touch with Luz after the war, until well into the 1960s. The overwhelming majority of the letters are written in German, some in French, and a smattering in English.

How Luz came to assume this role as a wartime go-between for Jewish parents and their children isn't entirely known, but Dwork has a theory. “When German Jews began escaping to Switzerland at the beginning of the war, they explored the role of letter-writing during the Holocaust. Dwork hopes the letters themselves will also serve as a pedagogical tool. “In the United States, we're moving increasingly toward document-based teaching of history, and these letters, written to and by children, would be ideal as a teaching tool.”

Dwork, who takes a special interest in the role of women during the Holocaust, says Luz intrigued her because “like so many other women, she fell under the radar.”