

# So we will never forget

By VALERIE ABRAHAMS

**A**s a young child in Eastchester, Margrit Polak discovered tattered letters in her parents' attic, letters that told an unorthodox love story set against a vast historical horror.

The letters, written by Margrit's parents Jaap and Ina Polak, reflected a complicated relationship, which began in Amsterdam during the Nazi era and continued throughout the Jewish couple's imprisonment in World War II concentration camps.

The discovery led Margrit on a journey to translate the letters and eventually get her parents' Holocaust survival story out to the world.

The Polaks, who emigrated from Holland after the war, were Eastchester residents and congregants at Shaarei Tikvah in Scarsdale until their deaths a few years ago. Cantor Gerald Cohen of Shaarei Tikvah, who has several operas to his credit and was a longtime friend of the couple, said their tale combined all the elements of great opera — life, death, war and forbidden love — which inspired him to compose "Steal a Pencil for Me," a full-length opera, with libretto by Deborah Brevoort, based on the couple's life story.

In 2013, to celebrate Ina's 90th and Jaap's 100th birthday, Cohen's opera had its first staged readings in workshops at Shaarei Tikvah and the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. Its world premiere as a full-length production took place in Denver in January.

Opera Colorado stars Inna Dukach and Gideon Dabi will sing selections from "Steal a Pencil for Me" at a Yom Hashoah Holocaust Remembrance Day service April 11, from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m., at Shaarei Tikvah Congregation on Fox Meadow Road in Scarsdale, presented in collaboration with Scarsdale Synagogue-Temples Tremont & Emanu-El.

Yom Hashoah is a day set aside each year to commemorate more than 11 million victims of Nazi genocide, including 6 million Jews.

"The opera says, even in times like that, people are still people and you can see the humanity even in that larger horrible history," Cantor Cohen said. "Six million is such a vast number, but you can begin to identify with it in a powerful way when you can see the individuals who lived it."

As most Holocaust survivors and witnesses have now died over time, Cohen said, his generation and generations to come will have to remember and tell the stories of the Holocaust.



Above, Holocaust survivors Jaap and Ina Polak in their youth and decades later. Right, actors Inna Dukach and Gideon Dabi as Jaap and Ina in "Steal a Pencil for Me."

PHOTOS COURTESY THE POLAK FAMILY AND MATTHEW STA



SUSAN WOOG WAGNER PHOTO

Cantor Gerald Cohen, composer of the opera "Steal a Pencil for Me."



HELEN KLISSEK DURING WESTPORTNOW.COM

Agnes Vertes recounts memories of German-occupied Hungary.



Survivor Dr. Harvey passenger on the S



WILL LANDIN PHOTOGRAPHY

A procession of more than 25 rescued Torah scrolls, now housed in Westchester, will take place at the Yom Hashoah Holocaust Commemoration Thursday, April 12, at the Garden of Remembrance in White Plains.

atrocities never happy

The sounding of a horn will open the p by a procession carry Torah scrolls rescued caust and now house area synagogues. A choir from Westche will sing musical sele Daniel Gropper, repre chester Board of Ra the invocation and w speakers, including s Westchester County Latimer.

Cantors Leslie Frieda Mendelsohn repre zanim, the Cantors of sing, followed by a c emony and recitation mourners' prayer.

At Westchester Re annual Yom Hashoah S sibility on April 11, I the father of temple chael Moser and a st