

War stories

As a teen, Sabina Zimering fled Poland and posed as a Catholic in Germany to escape Nazi persecution. Playwright Kira Obolensky has adapted her memoir for the stage.

By Graydon Royce
Star Tribune Staff Writer

Sabina Zimering visited some of the early rehearsals for "Hiding in the Open," which opens tomorrow night at Great American History Theatre. For the most part, that was fine with playwright Kira Obolensky, who adapted Zimering's memoir about surviving the Holocaust by posing as a Polish Catholic.

IF YOU GO

Hiding in the Open

What: Adapted by Kira Obolensky from the memoir by Sabina Zimering. Directed by Sari Ketter.

When: 8 p.m. Sat.; 2 p.m. Sun.; 10 a.m. Wed.; 10:30 a.m. & 7:30 p.m. Thu. Thru April 25.

Where: Great American History Theatre, 30 E. 10th St., St. Paul.

Tickets: \$25-\$27.
651-292-4323 or <http://www.historytheatre.com>.

her sister, Helka, on their trek through Germany, hiding their Jewishness and dodging countless tight spots.

"But Sabina would cry, and then we'd all start to cry," Obolensky said, teasing her collaborator during a recent interview.

"That's why they kicked me out," Zimering said with a smile.

The retired St. Louis Park ophthalmologist popped back for a cameo at rehearsal the other day, and she was on her best behavior — that is, she didn't cry. She watched as actors portrayed her and



Tom Sweeney/Star Tribune

Playwright Kira Obolensky (left) adapted Sabina Zimering's book about the Holocaust, "Hiding in the Open."

"You're under arrest!" an actor shouted at the girls at one point.

Zimering looked over at Obolensky and nodded with a silent affirmation that said "Yes, that is just how it happened."

HIDING IN THE OPEN continues on E8

HIDING IN THE OPEN from E1

Zimering was 16 when Germany bludgeoned her native Poland on Sept. 1, 1939, plunging Europe into a surrealistic nightmare that lasted six years. She and her family were quarantined in their hometown of Piotrkow. For three years, they survived hunger, degradation and disease while cramped into the kitchen of someone else's apartment.

Then in 1942, the Germans began liquidating the Jewish ghettos. Sabina's mother was tired of the struggle and seemed resigned to their fate. But even in her weariness, she enlisted Roman Catholic friends, Danka and Mala Justyna, in a scheme for her two teenage daughters to escape. Sabina and Helka would use the Catholic girls' identity papers and travel to Germany. There, they could work until the war ended — essentially hiding in broad daylight while they toiled as maids in a hotel frequented by German military men.

As the play shows, Zimering and her sister faced constant peril, surviving on bravura, pluck and luck.

"A lot of luck," she said with a laugh. "I was a teenager, and when you are a teenager, nothing is impossible."

Story finally emerged

Zimering, her sister and brother survived the war. Her mother perished at Treblinka and her father died two days before Buchenwald was liberated. The children immigrated to the Twin Cities and have lived here for half a century, working and raising families. Zimering's children had begged her for years to write her story. She demurred, citing the demands of running a medical practice. When she retired, her excuses evaporated, and she was left to cast back in her memory.

North Star Press of St. Cloud published her story, and Ron Peluso, History Theatre artistic director, asked Obolensky to adapt it for the stage.

"Some books should be plays, and others shouldn't," Obolensky said. "This is a book that for many reasons would work well for the collective experience. These young girls were acting, pretending while they were on this journey. So it

puts this swirl of characters into a theatrical device. It's like a vivid dream."

Zimering, 61, seems pleased with the result, even though the story looks different when it is compressed to dialogue.

"I thought I had suspense in the book, but she beat me," she said of Obolensky's script. "It's quite an experience."

The playwright's principal task with a 200-page memoir that sweeps through six years of the 20th century's definitive event is making it fit onto a stage with eight actors.

"The play cannot be about World War II, not with eight people," Obolensky said. "It can be about the human beings in the war. What's great about plays is that everything becomes metaphor."

Here, that metaphor becomes the myth of survival, guile and wit, practiced by two girls every time they faced danger. Once they feared a train conductor would inspect their papers and question why they were so far from Poland. Another time a guest at the Regensburg hotel commented to Sabina that she looked Jewish. Would he tell her employer? Should she and Helka run? Or would that raise suspicion? Perhaps the stiffest test came when Gestapo detained them, held them while they were thoroughly searched and then, inexplicably, let them go.

Zimering's story, though, insists on *respite of joy*.

"When Holocaust stories started showing up, I could only stand it up to a point," she said. "When I tried to write my story, I avoided uninterrupted terrible things."

For example, while she and Helka were in Regensburg, Zimering had a boyfriend, a Polish man a few years older than she. They talked, had dinner, went to movies, walked along the Danube River. Even in the Piotrkow ghetto she found romance.

"She did a lot of kissing," Obolensky said.

The anxiety and adventure of hiding every day made grief almost impossible when the girls were on the run. After the war ended and Zimering returned to her hometown, she could let her defenses down, and sadness poured into the void.

"That's the point where I always cry," Obolensky said, "when they come back

to Poland. That's the emotional breaking point."

Most of Zimering's extended family was killed in the Holocaust. She, Helke and brother Nathan, who was 8 when the war started, live in the Twin Cities area. Nathan was in Buchenwald with his father and witnessed some of the most tragic events of the Holocaust. He had thought he was the only family survivor until a military rabbi told him in Paris that his sisters were alive in Poland. Unlike Sabina, he has never talked about his experiences.

Zimering has stayed in touch with her Catholic angels through the years. Shortly after the war, she sent antibiotics when Danka came down with tuberculosis. Later, when Mala was jailed on suspicion of anti-Communist sentiment, Zimering sent documents to secure her release. In 1979, Zimering beseeched Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial Center in Jerusalem, to declare the sisters Righteous Among the Nations. They have been honored with plaques and planted trees in Israel.

"I just talked with Mala on Saturday," Zimering said. "E-mail."

For Obolensky, writing the play coincided with her learning some extraordinary details about her background. Her father's family also was affected by European totalitarianism, in the Soviet Union. She points out that she in no way compares her history with Zimering's, but she has begun to immerse herself in her family's tale, including her namesake, her father's aunt who was killed in 1937 during Stalin's purge.

"It's opened possibilities for me to address as a writer of my own history," she said. "Big tragedies take time to get through."

For Zimering, this staging is the latest manifestation of her story, one that has taken form on paper in the past decade but has its roots more than half a century ago. It is almost like a dream, another lifetime, she said.

"I couldn't believe it had happened," she said of her thoughts when she first sat down to write. "I'd had 40 years of normal life. How could that have happened? I wrote 40 years afterward, but I still could remember it."

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Playwright Kira Obolensky