

Holocaust survivors watch their story come to life on Hopkins stage

Graydon Royce, Star Tribune
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On a recent afternoon, Jack and Rochelle Sutin stopped by Stages Theatre Company to have a look at themselves. There they were, as teenagers in eastern Poland, skirting the anxious days of the 1930s, fending off anti-Semitic taunts and plunging headlong into the Holocaust.

There were scenes of joy, too. Jack Sutin pulled a small digital camera from his pocket and snapped a shot of two young actors dancing. He leaned in to Rochelle and said softly, "That's us."

The sweet moment -- as much as the bravery, courage and luck they summoned to survive World War II -- defines an almost-mythic love that has existed in this St. Louis Park couple since even before their makeshift wedding, in an underground bunker on Dec. 31, 1942. As ceremonies last week marked the 60th anniversary of the Auschwitz liberation, Jack and Rochelle are blessed to be watching their story come to life on the Hopkins stage. Based on their memoir, "Jack and Rochelle," on Thursday Stages will produce the world premiere of playwright Buffy Sedlachek's script.



Jack and Rochelle Sutin
Jerry Holt
Star Tribune

"We know the loss and suffering and that's very important," said Stages artistic director Steve Barberio, who is directing this piece. "But as we move to a new generation, it's important to talk about survival."

The Sutins' story first came to public attention in 1995 when Graywolf Press published "Jack and Rochelle, A Holocaust Story of Love and Resistance." It is an oral history, culled from 18 months' worth of recordings the couple made with their son, Lawrence, who then edited the tapes into a 200-page book. It has been published in several countries. (The cover of the German edition features a title that translates as "A Love Story During War" and a photo of an anonymous young blond girl, with no mention of Jack and Rochelle Sutin.)



Cast members act out a scene depicting the life of Holocaust survivors.

Jerry Holt
Star Tribune

They cried often, reliving such incidents as the needless slaughter by Polish police of Jack's mother; finding the body of Rochelle's father after the war, still clutching his bedroom slippers. There was constant deprivation, disease, danger. Comrades were lost, and nearly 50 relatives between their two families were killed.

It is different now. Through countless interviews, TV appearances, speeches to colleges and high schools, they have found the distance to maintain their composure, even to laugh.



Portrait of Jack and Rochelle Sutin (1946)

Jerry Holt
Star Tribune

"There were lots of close friends at our wedding," said Rochelle in an interview. "Lice, worms. The bridal party was just crawling."

Sedlachek became aware of their story after a reading from the book at the Jungle Theater in Minneapolis. Moved by the saga and impressed by the Sutins as such unassuming heroes, she immediately called Barberio and told him to secure adaptation rights.

"It was so appropriate for a youth theater because they were just kids when they were going through this," she said.

Rochelle joked that she told Stages that the girl who would play her "should look like a young Liz Taylor, or I'm not interested."

"What's important is to make people understand that this is true," Sedlachek said.

Her words seem unremarkable until you consider the circumstances of the Sutins' love story.

His dream said, "Wait"

Jack Sutin points to a photo of his mother that now hangs in the couple's bedroom.

"That is the face I saw in my dream," he said. "That was the face telling me to wait for Rochelle."

Jack and Rochelle had known each other only a little, he growing up in Mir and she in Stolpce, both of which today lie inside Belarus. But after Jack and his father, Julius, fled during the aftermath of a pogrom to a vast wilderness area in August 1942, they connected with other Jewish partisans and "lived like squirrels" in a bunker they dug into the side of a hill.

One night, Jack heard his mother's voice in a dream. She told him to make room in the bunker because Rochelle would come to him. This was crazy, his comrades said. He knew Rochelle as a schoolmate but they hadn't dated. It didn't make any sense. But Jack carved out some room next to him in the dark, fetid hole. He was certain Rochelle would come. Three months later, two girls who had fled the Stolpce ghetto found the bunker by happenstance. One of them was Rochelle. Those who mocked Jack before now deemed it a miracle.

She was skeptical herself, at one point moving out of the bunker because she thought Jack was telling her these stories for amorous purposes. It took her a while to warm up. Jack, though, never doubted.

"I knew we would have a long life together," he said.

Jack became a fearless fighter in the Jewish resistance, dynamiting bridges and roads, ambushing police and German troops, leading raids to nearby farms and villages for food.

"He was a mean son-of-a-gun," said Rochelle, who said that she begged him to quit taking so many risks.

"No one expected to survive," he countered, now in the comfort of their home.

That's true, she conceded. The partisans were driven by the thought they would fight until they died -- on their own terms, by bullets fired in combat.

Although they survived together and have thrived through 63 years of raising children and running businesses, the two have very different takes on the role of providence in their lives. Jack is convinced that "someone is watching over me."

"I told my rabbi about this and asked him if these weren't miracles," he said. Yes, the rabbi told him, it was indeed the hand of God.

"What would you expect a rabbi to tell you?" Rochelle said. "That's his business."

They laughed and she added, "He's more spiritual, I'm more skeptical."

As young Rochelle says in the stage play, shortly after hearing of another round of deaths: "If there is a God upstairs, he did not hear those women and children."

Tell the children

"I never expected our lives to be featured in the theater," Jack said last Wednesday, after watching a practice run of the poignant 70-minute drama.

During the rehearsal, they had whispered, smiled, laughed a few times and wiped away a few tears. It was unsettling to see fearful moments come back to life.

"I kept asking her, 'Do you remember this situation?' " he said.

Rochelle was cagier.

"You got to have some secrets," she said when asked what she had been murmuring to Jack. "You can't tell everything."

They applauded as the actors came down from the stage, some to greet the honored guests.

"You were great; you should be on Broadway," Jack said to actor Bruce Rowan, who portrays the adult Jack. The couple's daughter, Cecilia, who sat with them, said "I cry every time I see this. And I've known them my whole life."

As the actors went off on break, Rochelle was asked if Rowan was handsome enough to play the part of her husband. Without missing a beat, she patted her mate on the cheek.

"Nobody's handsome enough to play Jack."

He smiled.

Jack and Rochelle

What: Adapted by Buffy Sedlachek from a couple's World War II memoir, edited by Lawrence Sutin. Directed by Steve Barberio.

When: 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday. Additional shows in a varied schedule through March 6.

Where: Stages Theatre Company, 1111 Mainstreet, Hopkins.

Tickets: \$11 to \$14, 952-979-1111.

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