

Gainesville's annual Holocaust Remembrance ceremony on April 28th will feature a play based on letters written by Curt and Regina Schoenwald, Jews in Germany, to their son in the US. The letters were written between 1939 and 1941 from a "Jews House" in Berlin. The Schoenwalds never escaped Germany, were deported to Poland in 1942 and murdered in the Sobibor concentration camp in 1943.

Seventy-one years after their deaths, Curt and Regina's grandson, Gainesville resident Ken Wald, attended the premiere of a play about them in Lincoln, Nebraska. The writing of the play and its second performance in Gainesville this month is a story in itself.

The saga began with an email sent late in 2012 to Ken Wald by Chris Maly, a high school English teacher in Wald's hometown of Lincoln. Maly congratulated Wald on his published essay about his grandparents, "The Ghosts on the Wall." The article recounted how a cache of letters discovered in his late father's files brought to life these largely unknown relatives who died in the Nazi Holocaust.

Maly asked permission to use the essay in developing educational projects to study hatred. He explained his personal interest in the story of Wald's grandparents:

My grandfather was a liberator and suffered PTSD for the duration of his life based on his experiences in Germany during the war and his recent passing reminded me of what you have said of our responsibility as children and grandchildren: Keep the stories alive.

Wald gave Maly permission to use the essay but was unsure if he should grant the teacher access to the letters written by Curt and Regina Schoenwald to their son Heinz in America. Wald and his brother were scheduled to attend an event in Lincoln a few months later so a face-to-face meeting with the teacher was arranged.

Wald came away from that meeting confident Maly would use the family letters to educate public school students about the dangers of hate. "The more I learned about Chris," Wald said, "the more I realized he had the biography to back up his request."

Four years earlier, Maly had received the prestigious Trenholm Award from the National Education Association for writing and staging a play about Emmet Till, the black youth brutally murdered in Mississippi. The play was performed at Lincoln High School and, in response to public demand, at the prestigious Lied Center for Performing Arts of the University of Nebraska. It was also put on by students in English and Drama classes at two schools in Mississippi.

Fast forward to April 2014. "The Ghosts on the Wall," Maly's play based on Wald's essays and the Schoenwald letters, was performed before a packed auditorium at Lincoln High School.

"Even though I knew every word of the letters," Wald recalls, "I was transfixed by the story Chris had fashioned from them." Through his dialogue, the playwright had balanced the Schoenwalds' attempt to live as normal a life as the Nazis allowed them while preparing eagerly for the new life they expected to live in the United States.

The play was later performed as a reading at a Ted Conference in Lincoln.

Several years later, Wald mentioned the play to Steven Butler, executive/artistic director of the Actors' Warehouse in Gainesville. Butler thought the play might be suitable as part of Gainesville's annual Holocaust memorial. So did the Holocaust Remembrance Committee of the Jewish Council whose members enthusiastically embraced the partnership between the two organizations.

In addition to their roles as artistic director and playwright, Butler and Maly will participate in the annual candle-lighting that is part of the remembrance ceremony before the play.