

Breaking the Silence

By
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STORY OF THE PLAY

Three women with three different generations of memory are bound together by the specter of the Holocaust. The drama unfolds as the three struggle to accept their own stories as well as each other's. Love, resentment, anger, and fear of the slow and unstoppable march of time lend urgency to the interplay between this family that is so deeply marked by tragedies, spoken and silent.

Set in the reality of Manhattan the characters are returned to a world that no longer exists through the power of their dreams. Shaina, a young medical student and member of the "third generation," serves as the center of conflict for her mother Renee, a neonatologist at Mount Sinai, and her grandmother Rosa, a survivor of Auschwitz and the Lodz Ghetto. Rosa's wartime experiences and the secrets she still keeps from that trauma fascinate Shaina, who deserts her boyfriend and education to travel to Poland and explore her family's history. Upon her return, the relationships among the three women begin to splinter beneath the weight of unsaid stories.

While a worried but supportive Rosa finds herself unsure of how far into memory she is willing to travel for Shaina's sake, Renee wholeheartedly rejects the legacy of the Holocaust and encourages Shaina to break free from the ties of the past. Renee is pursued by her own demons, haunted by a lifetime of living in the shadow of her mother's suffering, and driven to play out these insecurities in liaisons with unsavory men. The responsibility of a parent to their child is a thread that spins itself throughout the play, culminating in revelations that shock all three and force them to acknowledge how much secrets have cost them.

Together, these women must face the inexorable progression of time, which hardens old scars and summons old ghosts. As Rosa nears the end of her life and Renee and Shaina try to take the next step in theirs, it becomes clear that only through the power of dreams and the strength of love can the meaning of the past and the value of the present truly be realized.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4 m, 3 w)

ROSA EBERKOHN: A grandmother, small in stature, 80s, uses a walker. Very courageous.

RENEE EBERKOHN: Rosa's daughter, 55, head of Department of Neonatology at Mount Sinai Hospital.

SHAINA EBERKOHN: Renee's daughter, 22, a pre-medical student.

RABBI YAKOV EBERKOHN: Rosa's brother, 45, Hassidic rabbi.

HANS: A man at a New York bar.

CHAIM RUMKOWSKI: Lodz Ghetto chairman, 65, male.

SS OFFICER: 30-40, male.

Initially entitled *Eavesdropping on Dreams*, this play was first produced by the Barefoot Theatre Company at the Cherry Lane Theater's blackbox theater. It ran from April 20th to May 19, 2012. It was directed by Ronald Cohen. The production team featured Niluka Hotaling (set design), Eric Nightengale (lighting design), Victoria Malvagno (costume design), Jennie West (costume assistant), Adam Stone (sound design), Adam Dalton (graphic design), Michael Denis (production stage manager) and Kristina Mueller (assistant stage manager). Francisco Solorzano was Producing Artistic Director and Nicole Haran was Co-Artistic Director of Barefoot Theatre Company. Judy Keller was Casting Director and Associate Producing with Samantha Fontana.

The cast was as follows:

Lynn Cohen...Rosa Eberkohn

Stephanie Roth Haberle...Renee Eberkohn

Aidan Kohler...Shaina Eberkohn

Michael Shapiro...Yakov Eberkohn/Rumkowski

Chris Whalen...Hans/SS Officer

SCENES

(All settings may be represented minimally with props, set pieces, lighting, and area staging.)

Prologue: Rosa's vivid dream.

Scene 1: Afternoon, 2004. Rosa's assisted-living apartment in Riverdale.

Scene 2: Early evening. Dr. Renee Stern's office at Mount Sinai Hospital.

Scene 3: Later at a dark bar in New York City.

Scene 4: Later that night in Renee's Upper West Side penthouse. In her dream we see a cobweb-filled closet with working door.

Scene 5: The next day, {the first day of Rosh Hashanah} at a restaurant in Central Park.

Scene 6: Later that day at Renee's penthouse.

Scene 7: Rosa's apartment.

Scene 8: Later that night. Renee's bedroom and a memory world.

Scene 9: Next evening in Renee's living room.

Scene 10: Rosa's hospital room.

Scene 11: Two months later in Rosa's apartment.

Scene 12: One month later at Renee's apartment.

Prologue: A Dream

(AT RISE: A spotlight on YAKOV DS.)

YAKOV: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the House of Culture here in the Lodz Ghetto. Out of more than two hundred ghettos in Poland the Lodz Ghetto survived the longest. Four and a half years. Most of us died or disappeared—who remembers us, and how? I don't know. But many of us live on in dreams.

(LIGHTS up on one side of the stage on ROSA who is dreaming:

ROSA: Yakov, you are here again?

YAKOV: I am here to remind you.

ROSA: You mean to haunt me? My dear brother, I thought you loved me.

YAKOV: Of course, I love you, Reisele. But, now I am your secret. I don't like secrets. Secrets torment the soul! *(Reproachful, shaking his finger.)* Our Torah teaches us to seek the truth! *(Beat.)* I begin this chronicle in the Jewish New Year of 5702, that is, September 1941, with the eldest of the Jews claiming that menacing clouds are hanging over us as the New Year begins. He asks everyone to pray to God that he spare us from any new affliction. Our chairman, Chaim Rumkowski, selected by the Germans, has assured us that he would stand guard over the fate of our community and that we would successfully extricate ourselves from all our difficulties. What he really meant was that overnight our ghetto became a sealed work camp, with barbed wire, electric fences, cut off from the rest of the world, impossible to escape from— *(SFX: A loud knock on the door.)* My little sister Reisele, I could not stop worrying about her... And now there are three women who will not let me rest. — Le Shanah Tovah. Happy New Year.

(SFX: Another loud knock. SPOTLIGHT on Yakov fades.)

Scene 1

(AT RISE: ROSA is dozing, listening to the radio. "Euvgheny Oneigin" is playing. Her walker is near her chair.)

ROSA: Mehr-hackt. Mer-knakt.

(SFX: There is another knock on the door. It startles her; she is too afraid to get up.)

ROSA: *(Cont'd.)* What happened? An andere krieg? Another war? *(Whispering.)* Eherkimpt Shoin. He is here...They're here. Gey avec!

(SFX: Pounding on the door.)

ROSA: *(Cont'd.)* I cannot stand banging. *(Grabs a pillow to protect herself.)*

SHAINA: *(Offstage.)* It's me. Shaina.

ROSA: *(Opens the door.)* Gottenu, Nanichka? I was having a nap, but I am not dreaming. You are really back. How wonderful to see you.

(SHAINA, wearing a hat, enters carrying her backpack and suitcase.)

SHAINA: I came here straight from the airport. Too much has happened to me. Oh Booba, Shana Tova!

ROSA: What a blessing, Nanitchka. Shana Tova. Let me look at you...four long months...to Poland... We were worried to death!

SHAINA: Booba, just think of it! The March of the Living, all those people together, students from so many countries, marching from Auschwitz to Birkenau, the three miles our grandparents were forced to walk to the gas chambers. All I could think of was you –

ROSA: Nanichka, we must call your mother. Does she even know—

SHAINA: What can I tell her?! That I went back to Lodz? She doesn't want to hear that.

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ROSA: Nu shoin...the most important thing is that you are finally back.

ROSA: What is this meshuggene hat you are wearing?

SHAINA: I thought you'd like my new retro look. I thought it would remind you of the good old days.

ROSA: What good old days?

SHAINA: I found it in a thrift shop in Lodz. Who knows, it may even be one of the hats you made.

ROSA: Nu, take it off. Let's take a look. *(SHAINA takes off her hat and hands it to ROSA who examines it and shakes her head.)* Schlumpy stitches, Feh! I never sewed like this. The buyers from the French boutiques all knew my stitches. *(ROSA hands her back the hat; SHAINA disappointedly puts it back on.)*

SHAINA: I walked up and down the streets of Lodz pretending I was you.

ROSA: Before the war if you mentioned the name Eberkohn everyone would know who we were... *(Beat.)* Does your mother know you're here? You know your mother, she will start to worry.

SHAINA: Dr. Renee Stern, the world famous neonatologist is too busy with her babies to worry about me...

ROSA: Nu, do not criticize your mother! She is a real mensch, she saves babies all day long!

SHAINA: Is she still pissed?

ROSA: You mean angry? How would I know? She keeps everything inside. *(Beat.)* My little maidele, you went without her approval.

SHAINA: Big deal, I skipped the beginning of the school year. Sometimes there are more important things in life.

ROSA: What can be more important than your education?

SHAINA: I know, I know.

SHAINA and ROSA: It's one thing no one can take away from you.

SHAINA: In Lodz, there was the ceremony commemorating sixty-five years since the liquidation of the Lodz Ghetto. There I stood among thousands of people, descendants of Lodz from all over the world...tearful, wide-eyed faces, silently gazing at each other, secretly asking: are you my

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