



## BWW Interview: Mona Golabek on her One Woman Show

by Sherry Shameer Cohen, December 19, 2018 ~ Westport, CT

If you think doing a one-person show is hard enough, try doing it as both a thespian and a musician.

For third generation pianist Mona Golabek, this ambitious idea began almost 30 years ago when she was engaged to play the Grieg piano concerto in A minor. She remembered that it was her mother's dream to play this concerto at Vienna's biggest concert hall, but horrors of the Holocaust interfered. She remembered the many stories her mother told her at bedtime and then thought about writing a book or getting a film made about her mother's stories. "I have no idea what overcame me," recalls Golabek. "A dream emerged in my heart.... I just never gave up."

Heart is what has made Golabek's idea a reality. Serendipity, too. Everyone knows that unless you're a celebrity, it's hard to get a book published. Fortunately, a man accidentally knocked on the door to her apartment while looking for a different one. He saw the manuscript spread on the floor and mentioned that he has contacts in the book industry. He sent it to Warner Books in New York and the editors wanted to meet her. "I took them over to Steinway...to the Rachmaninoff Room. I played for 30 minutes. It was a prototype" of what *The Pianist of Willesden Lane* would eventually become. "It was the music that captured their heart in the end," she says, and they offered her a book deal for *The Children of Willesden Lane: A True Story of Hope and Survival During World War II*, which she co-wrote with Lee Cohen. There are adult and young adult versions of the book. "Some wonderful folks from different foundations believed in it," she says. They found it powerful and brought the concept to schools.

Every author has to have a platform to sell a book. Adapting the story of Lisa Jura, a prodigal 14-year-old pianist who fled Nazi-occupied Vienna on the Kindertransport, is an unusual platform, but it works. "My life changed when I met Hershey [Felder]," she maintains. "I just cannot speak highly enough of him. He is a brilliant artist, director, producer. He took a chance on me. He adapted it for the stage. He got me an audition at The Geffen Playhouse in the Audrey Skirball Kenis Theatre." What was to be a six-week run turned into six months. That's when Felder started to tour of *The Pianist of Willesden Lane*. "I can still remember my nerves. This was a whole new world for me."

But adapting to this new world took work because her performing experience was as a concert pianist. "My lucky day was meeting the premier acting teacher/ coach Howard Fine," she says. "He also had a background of his family coming out of the Holocaust." He trained her as an actress. One of the great things she learned from him was how to be spontaneous on stage. "Over time I began to understand what he was trying to explain to me." Another piece of demanding advice he gave her was, "If it doesn't cost you every night, get off that stage. Don't do the show anymore." That's pretty heady for someone who went into acting accidentally. It fit in with Felder's approach. "There's no compromise with him," Golabek says. "The bar is extremely high in all that he does." She adds that he warned her, "You'll be on your own on that stage and you will have to prepare. No one's going to back you up. You're all on your own."

She also learned how to get into the various characters she plays, which include Lisa as a 14-year-old and then as an adult, the Viennese piano teacher, the people in England who housed the refugee children, and the children themselves. She worried at first. "How do I have a voice as a kid? And accents. It's not easy. My German accent is better for some reason." But Fine advised her, "Don't worry so much about the accents. Think about the life of the character." He gave her the background of Aaron, another refugee who joined the fight against the Nazis. "Where's he coming from?" coached Fine. "The circumstances? The voice will come." Another character is Mrs. Cohen, who had 30 refugee children in her house. "What had she done that day?" he would guide her. "Now I can jump into the characters right away."

She also had to master how to talk and play the piano at the same time. In one scene, she plays the fast Bach partita in B flat major to projected images of sewing machines in a factory where Lisa worked while in England. "Each stitch is like a note of music," says Golabek. "I'm speaking fast...like acrobats. I worked very hard."

One of the most moving projections in the play are of the crosses in the American cemetery on the beaches of Normandy. "Those men, so young, who gave their lives so we can walk in freedom," she says. "I try to impart that" on young people. Another part of the show that is most moving for her is when Lisa went to the agencies to look at the lists of survivors, hoping to find members of her family. "I remember her anguish," she says. It was one of the stories that her mother told her at bedtime. (Lisa was reunited with her two sisters.) "I remember as a child growing up and meeting other refugees. When I'm on stage I'm loading their images into my heart."

The story takes place during World War II, but it isn't just about the Holocaust. It's the story of man's humanity to man. It encourages people to think about what means the most to them and what they hold onto when times are tough. People have told Golabek that this story is needed now more than ever because of the rising hatred against minorities and families being separated because of government policy, right here in the country that for centuries welcomed everyone from everywhere. The show and Citywide Reads program give her an opportunity to influence young people to think about our purpose here on earth. Golabek is working with multiple foundations, including USC Shoah Foundation and her own foundation, Hold on To Your Music, to teach people of all ages about those who lived during the Holocaust.