

*Their letters to a Holocaust survivor inspired a play.*

## Children touched a scarred soul

By Maureen Fitzgerald  
INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

In the fall of 1943, Esther Raab was one of 300 Jews who escaped from Sobibor, a Nazi death camp, after the prisoners revolted, killing at least 12 guards and fleeing into the woods.

Each night for nearly 60 years, Esther Raab has relived the horrors.

"Every night, I go to Sobibor," said Raab, 77, of Vineland, Cumberland County. "Then I go to sleep."

She has tried to requite her survival by testifying to convict several Nazi guards and by working as a consultant for the book and movie *Escape From Sobibor*.

But it is children who have helped to heal her soul.

The children who sat in awe when she went to their schools to tell her story, who hugged her and apologized to her and told her she was a miracle. And the children who wrote her letters — hundreds and hundreds of letters, calling her strong and brave.

Raab answered every letter, and from each one she drew strength and hope.

Those letters have become the heart of a play about Raab's life that premiered in 1998 at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. It is now being performed through March 25 by the Westmont Theatre Company in Westmont, Camden County.

About 3,000 students from private and public schools in Pennsylvania and New Jersey will view the play, *Dear Esther*, and participate in educational programs about the Holocaust.

Raab insisted on that when she agreed to let Richard Rashke write the play.

"It must be for the children," she said in an interview. "If we can reach the children, then there is hope."

The play tells Esther's story, from the days before World War II when she and her family lived a happy, middle-class life in the Polish city of Chelm to her escape from the death camp.

Early in the play, Raab's father is marched out of town and shot in a ditch. Her only sibling, her brother, escapes after lying among the bodies, pretending to be dead.

Soon after, her mother, unable to go on without her husband, walks into a Gestapo office and asks to be shot. The German soldiers take her to a cemetery and put a bullet in

See **DEAR ESTHER** on B6