

New doc tells story of concentration camp musicians

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Amid the ashes of Auschwitz, a band of starving inmates stood in the cold with their instruments, scratching out Strauss and Beethoven melodies every day. It was intended as a Nazi trick to distract new arrivals from their impending extermination.

But for the Jewish prisoners who played in those sad ensembles, the music kept them alive.

That bizarre footnote of Holocaust history is the subject of the documentary “They Played for Their Lives,” conceived and directed by Menlo Park-based composer, music teacher and filmmaker Nurit Jugend.



Anita Wallfisch plays the cello in the women's orchestra at Auschwitz. (Illustration-Ari Binus)

Eight years in the making, “They Played for Their Lives” has its West Coast premiere on Jan. 23 with a free screening at Stanford University.

For Jugend, a native Israeli, music has always been the most powerful force in her life. But until she started interviewing Holocaust survivors for her film, Jugend hadn't grasped its full spiritual dimensions.

“I didn't need to be convinced how important and powerful music is in my life,” says Jugend, 44, who earned a Ph.D. in music at Stanford and whose compositions have been performed by groups around the world, including the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. “Until I began to make the film, music had been a form of entertainment or, for me as a composer, a form of self-

expression. But I didn't know music was so powerful it could actually save a person's life.”

In the 50-minute documentary, Jugend profiles several survivors, all of whom had been proficient musicians before World War II. Alice played piano, Anita the cello and Frank the accordion, and Helmut could whistle a jazz tune like nobody's business.

On camera, all describe their prewar lives, most devoted to family and musical study. They then contrast that with the shock of Hitler's Final Solution, when they were deported to ghettos or concentration camps.

Auschwitz bunkmates Helmut Spriczter (left) and Frank Grunwald reunite after 65 years. (Photo/Rotem Yaron)

As a young teen in Terezin, Greta sang in the cast of the children's musical “Brundibar.” Chaim taught an SS officer how to play the harmonica in exchange for a promise to stop beating his father. Anita played the cello in the Auschwitz women's



orchestra, and she earned extra rations and clothing for playing at private Nazi functions.

The survivors retell these and other stories, many accompanied by animated drawings that capture the horror of the experience.

Jugend knew she didn't want her movie simply to be talking heads, so she inserted evocative animation by illustrator Ari Binus, whose drawings have been featured in many books, including the popular "Littlest" series by Sylvia Rouss.

Jugend admits she knew nothing about filmmaking until she decided she "had to" make the documentary.

"Two significant parts of my life came together in making this film," she says. "The professional one is the music, which has played a major role part in my life. The more personal one is my family's history: Most of my mother's side of the family perished in Auschwitz."



Nurit Jugend
(Photo/Naomi Schmidt)

Jugend's cameras were there when Israeli and German children's choirs came together to perform the children's opera "Brundibar" in Israel. The guest of honor was Greta, who received a standing ovation and sang with the kids in an encore.

"It was good luck," Jugend says. "I had no part in organizing it, but when I heard the choirs were working together, I asked permission to film the rehearsals and the performance."

The emotional heart of the film comes near the end, when Helmut and Frank, bunkmates at Auschwitz who both survived by playing music, are reunited for the first time since the liberation of the camp.

Jugend says that reunion was probably the most powerful moment in her eight years of working on the project.

"When I learned Helmut was alive and I mentioned that to Frank, he was excited," she says. "They hadn't seen each other in 65 years at the time. I thought it would be incredible to bring them together. We had three days of them playing together, Frank on accordion, Helmut whistling, and the two of them talking about their joint experiences."

Born in Haifa, Jugend studied violin as a child, first in Boston and then back in Israel. She attended the Jerusalem Rubin Academy for Music and Dance, got her master's in Germany and did her doctorate at Stanford.

She has composed many published works and has won numerous awards; she also has lectured widely on various topics and is a teacher in continuing education programs at Santa Clara University and Stanford, and at Lehrhaus Judaica.

In the months ahead, Jugend will take her documentary to film festivals, Jewish and otherwise, and promote it to Holocaust and other educators. She also has put together an accompanying teacher's guide.

Making the film reminded her that as the number of Holocaust survivors continues to dwindle, their stories must be preserved.

But a key message she hopes to convey in "They Played for Their Lives" is one of strength in the face

of adversity.

“The act of creativity in general expresses a person’s hope and will to live,” she says. “[The survivors] found joy, love and meaning through music. It really demonstrates their inner strength. It’s a kind of spiritual resistance.”

“They Played for Their Lives” screens 7:30 p.m. Monday, Jan. 23 at Cubberley Auditorium, 485 Lasuen Mall, Stanford. Free. <http://www.tinyurl.com/played-lives-stanford>