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The redemptive power of music is the theme of “They Played for the Lives,” a powerful and illuminating documentary by Dr. Nurit Jugend exploring the importance of music for several Holocaust survivors.

The film’s eight interview subjects endured the hell of the Nazi ghettos and concentration camps. To them, music was not only a source of comfort but the difference between life and death.

“You focused totally on the music, and the enjoyment of the melody, and the improvisation, and that forces you to forget everything else,” Frank Misa Grunwald, an accordionist and Auschwitz survivor, explains in the film.

“Because my focus now is not on fear, but on the joy of music and the melody, and the creative aspect of what I’m going to sing, what the next note is going to be.”

To illustrate the deeply personal narratives of its subjects, Jugend relies on simple illustrated sketches rather than the standard archival footage or voiceover narration. The drawings, which are unpretentious and almost childlike, capture the ways in which memories can blur and fade but remain haunting.

In the midst of Auschwitz, music could be an empowering tool. As Helmuth Szprycer, another survivor of the most notorious Nazi death camp, puts it, music was “the language of survival.”

“If you have a life, which doesn’t go on so good, music can make you happy,” Szprycer elaborates. “Music belongs to the one who plays the music. They cannot take it away from you.”

Unlike many Holocaust films, “They Played for their Lives” is not a lament but a celebration of music and life. It is a film about reunions and the mysterious ability of music to forge unbreakable bonds.

Toward the end of the feature, Szprycer is warmly reconnected with the younger Grunwald, whom he had looked after during their time in Auschwitz.

“You remember the band?” Szprycer immediately asks Grunwald. “And you remember when I came in and



The role of music in the lives of Jews during the Holocaust is the subject of the new film “They Played for their Lives” [JP capture]

they asked me to whistle?"

Music was also critical to the survival of Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, a professional cellist, who recounts being a member of the Auschwitz's Women's Orchestra under conductor Alma Rosé.

"There was a band in every single camp, but we were the only women's one," Wallfisch says. "So every morning we sat at the gate, we played marches, every evening we sat at the gate, we played marches for the slave laborers who went out to the various factories."

Alma Rosé, a niece of Gustav Mahler, took her role as conductor of the camp's orchestra just as seriously as if she were conducting in Vienna or Paris. Her strict, no-nonsense approach allowed Wallfisch and the other members of the orchestra to temporarily forget the horror of their surroundings.

"We were so busy trying to play and Alma was terribly strict and we were all scared stiff of Alma, and she used to punish us when we played wrong notes and things like that," Wallfisch remembered. "Alma managed with a sort of crazy emphasis on making music, that we temporarily perhaps didn't think where we were."

Also featured in the film is Alice Herz-Sommer, a pianist and Theresienstadt camp survivor.

"What was so difficult to be with a little child, five-and-a-half, in a concentration camp?" Herz-Sommer asks. "Because he asked hundreds of questions. Why are we here? What are Jews? What is Hitler? Why have we nothing to eat? What can you tell him, why we have nothing to eat? I didn't know, my husband didn't know, what to tell to him."

Herz-Sommer noted that some of this hardship was alleviated thanks to *Brundibar*, a children's opera in the camp her son performed in.

Herz-Sommer said the opera "helped him a little bit, because...he was with children, this helped him."

The film's final emotional reunion takes place between Greta Klingsberg, a Theresienstadt survivor who played the lead role of Aninka in the *Brundibar* opera, and Herz-Sommer, her former piano teacher.

It is also Klingsberg who, at the end, encapsulates the film's enduring message.

"There is no life without music," she says, after we see her watching a modern-day staging of *Brundibar*. "None. None."

"They Played for their Lives" airs tonight, April 3rd, on New York 13 at 10:30 PM. Check your local PBS listings.

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