

Review: Film Festival docs worth seeing

by [Debra Bresnan](#) / October 13, 2016 / 0 comments



Hellmuth T. Szprycer, whistler, with accordion player, Frank Grunwald

They Played For Their Lives

“The tricky thing,” says filmmaker Dr. Nurit Jugend, “is to get past the “H” word.” Her film, “They Played For Their Lives,” has its world premiere at this weekend’s Woodstock Film Festival. “I’m glad to hear you say it’s an uplifting film,” she confessed to me. “That’s absolutely the feeling I got from the Holocaust survivors I met. They said I presented them and the situation very well. The uplifting feeling, the joy, the warmth...they said all of that came through.”

The film, which chronicles the experiences of eight Holocaust survivors, presents life in the Jewish ghetto and in the Nazi concentration camps through music and spoken recollections from people now in their elder years. More than 100 charcoal illustrations by Ari Binus personalize their stories with images from everyday life. Performing and composing was a lifeline for these young musicians — and they relied upon music to evoke happier days and to briefly escape from the horrors of slavery, gas chambers, deprivation and degradation in the camps. Today, music remains a connecting link between past and present, offering beauty, nostalgia, comfort and a way to communicate about their lives.

While growing up in Israel, Jugend says once a year, her family would sit in front of the television and watch documentaries about the Holocaust. “I really found it hard. The topic closes doors, and people — including myself — tend to shut down. In making this film, I wanted to approach it from a different angle and add to the topic,” she explains. “Rather than show misery, traumatic difficulty, the victimized part of the Holocaust, I wanted to convey that in spite of the situation, beautiful music was written and performed. The act of creativity is an expression of hope, and it demonstrates inner strength and a spiritual resistance. Some of the music expresses melancholia and longing, and it’s extraordinary how such beautiful notes came from that (experience). Music really saves lives and gives people strength. When you’re in a dark place, you can find a light if these people can. It was empowering.”

Jugend, a composer and lecturer, teaches at Stanford University as well as throughout the United States, Israel and Brazil. She has received a number of prestigious awards and authored over a dozen published works that have been performed by leading orchestras, ensembles and conductors. Being a musician is obviously an essential part of her being, as is the fact that most of her mother’s family had perished in Auschwitz so she knew very little about them. “These two parts of my life were so significant, very intertwined, but a third thing was the trigger for me.”

Seven years ago, she was in a deep, dark place in her life and says she began to “look around to see how people manage to see hope, light, keep going, find joy in life when they find themselves in so deep. The Holocaust was, of course, a very extreme example to look up to, but these people kept going. They not only rebuilt their lives; they found joy, love and meaning – and music helped them to find that. That was the trigger for me.”

“All the other films made about the Holocaust felt so hard, and I wanted to find a way through the arts to make learning about the Holocaust more accessible and stimulating. I hope it can serve as a tool for educators,” she adds. Following her appearance here, screenings are planned around International Holocaust Memorial Day in California; at Liberation Day ceremonies in Europe; and Jugend is receiving requests from a wide variety of audiences, including medical departments, educational institutions, congregations and festivals.

Before interviewing these survivors, Jugend felt that because people were forced to play music in the orchestra — as people were led into the gas chambers, passed on their way to work, and for performances for the SS officers — that it would resonate with them as trauma. “I thought that music would be something they would not want to do or go back to,” says Jugend. “The surprise was that it felt like a blessing. It was the one thing that got them through, and they cherished it, loved it. All the people I interviewed — here in the United States, in Europe, in Israel — they all expressed the same idea. The survivors I met were so full of music, and it was a source of healing and of joy.”

Another surprise was that many of these survivors now have children or grandchildren who are playing music, too, either professionally or as a hobby. In these families, music was a way to pass on a big part of history and of their selves, too. “The continuity of music, culture and of life, despite evil, is a powerful statement about the ability of people to

survive. It's also a message about what's going on in the world today: there's a driving force of life that will keep going and hope is one of the basic components to survive."

There are many sweet moments and poignant insights in this film, and local fans of Ars Choralis will be interested to see and hear cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, whom they met while touring Germany with "Music in Desperate Times" in 2009. "The cello, in the end, saved my life," Lasker-Wallfisch says in the film. "Music was outside what the Germans could destroy."

Hellmuth T. Szprycer, who now lives in Los Angeles and still whistles a happy tune as he did in the concentration camp in exchange for extra food and clothing, is reunited on-screen with accordion player, Frank Grunwald, after 66 years. The former says, "When you have trouble and difficulties in life, music is the first thing to help you."

Personal stories are interwoven with the horrors and the aftermath of the Holocaust to achieve a holistic view, so it's not saccharine by any means. But the depth here, and the restorative power of music, brings a new chapter to a familiar tale of woe, and lightens it with the kind of hope we all so desperately need in these times.

One of the more beautiful things about the movie is that it brings home the fact that music is a universal language and it can unite people, despite differences. "Anyone can speak the language of music...musicians from China and Israel can make music together," says Jugend. "One goal of making the movie was to preserve history and to keep the conversation going about the Holocaust. I hope it helps us to develop more tolerance. Even if people are not like us, we can still make music together with harmony. That's a very powerful message."

Jugend had no idea that making this film — her first — would take seven years or that it would be such a difficult learning curve. "I was so naïve and not from the film industry, but I jumped into it full force. I had to learn from scratch, and it was very challenging," she admits.

"My co-producer, co-director and editor, Aaron I. Butler, lives in L.A. and we've only met maybe twice face-to-face. Ari (Binus), the illustrator, lives in Boston. Both of them were truly invested and involved, and our small team will be friends for life. The hardships of life bring people together in an intimate and personal way," Jugend adds. "Making the film and meeting the survivors helped me pull out of my dark situation. I thought, 'OK, I succeeded, that's what I wanted.' Now I want to make a difference in other people's lives too."

Jugend will be at both screenings — Saturday, October 15 at 11 a.m. at Woodstock Playhouse and Sunday at 2:30 p.m. at Upstate Films in Rhinebeck — and Grunwald and his grandson, John, will offer a short musical performance on accordion and piano following the film screening in Woodstock.

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