

About The Film



Through intimate interviews and live performances, *They Played for Their Lives* artfully portrays how music saved the lives of young musicians. Playing music in the ghettos and concentration camps not only fostered spiritual strength within themselves and others, but often proved a bargaining tool that spared their lives. The documentary follows the personal narratives of eight survivors. Chaim recounts how he saved his father from beatings, by teaching an SS officer to play the harmonica. Anita, who played cello in the Women's Orchestra in Auschwitz, was spared inhumane forced labor. And little Hellmuth whistled with the band in exchange for extra food and clothing. Each of these unique stories illustrate the power of music to sustain the human soul. At the end of the war their lives unfold in surprising ways, yet music remains at the core of their memory and legacy. Charcoal illustrations, a live piano performance by 106-year old Alice, and a moving reunion of two boys who searched for each other for 66-years, make this compelling viewing.



Illustration by Ari Binus

A Note From The Director



One of the first questions people ask me is why I chose to make this film. By profession, I'm a classical composer and music lecturer at Stanford University. Music has been an essential part of myself since early childhood. I'm also 3rd generation of Holocaust survivors from my mother's side. Most of my family perished in Auschwitz concentration camp and I know very little of their fate. Seven years ago, I found myself in a deep dark place, wondering where one can find hope. It was the trigger that prompted me to embark on a personal journey, and what brought together two significant parts of my life - music and family.



I have often wondered what were my family's last days in Auschwitz like; what did they think and feel? What were their last hopes, wishes or lost dreams? While pondering the fate of my family, it was only natural for me to wonder whether there was any music making in the ghettos and concentration camps. Did people sing or play an instrument while imprisoned? Did composers write new music and songs?

During my research I discovered the rich cultural lives that developed in these places. I was moved to learn, that while very few items were permitted in the ghettos and concentration camps, from all things, some chose their musical instrument. I was driven to discover how people were able to live in such distress and horror, yet find motivation to play music or write a new song. I learned, that for people living under inhumane existence, acts of creativity, such as playing music and composing, provided inner strength, spiritual resistance, and to some even the ability to survive. As a composer, I was impressed by the ability of songwriters and composers to create new music under such circumstances.

The music that arose from the ghettos and concentration camps is an extremely significant and invaluable part of a culture and music history. It's a testament to people's lives, their day to day experience, feelings and hopes. Many of the songs and compositions have a nostalgic or melancholic feel to them - suggesting longing for the past or better times.

To my surprise, much of it felt uplifting and hopeful. And I was especially awed by the beautiful tunes that emerged from what I consider hell. I felt it was essential, to not only preserve and revive, but also recognize this music and its historical context as a valuable musical legacy and testament.

When I met with the survivors in the film, they ranged between ages 80 to 106 years old. I was eager to listen to their testimonials, and learn about an important part of history first hand. As such, I felt an urgency to capture their stories as soon as possible. These survivors endured the unimaginable, yet their drive to live lent them hope and the power, to not only survive, but to also rebuild their lives after the Holocaust, find joy, love and meaning through music.

The film aims to keep the conversation about the Holocaust alive. Though countless lives, cultures and nations may be destroyed through trauma and genocide, their legacies live on in songs, compositions, musical instruments and those who survived. With this film I would like to honor the memory of those persecuted and acknowledge their legacy. I would like to send the message that music is a universal language, which speaks to all mankind. It is one of the more powerful resources available to us all; it can offer people a temporary relief while physically being in horrific circumstances, and has the ability to empower the inherent resilience we as human beings have within ourselves. Music has the power to unite people regardless of faith or religion. It can be utilized to embolden people for tolerance and acceptance of one another.

By screening 'They Played For Their Lives', I would like to inspire hope, to empower and to uplift the human soul. To those who have experienced trauma or the dark side of life, and to all survivors, I would like to send the message that even in adversity one can find light. I hope that this essence shines through the narratives of the people who shared their stories with us in the film, and the music they play.

-- Dr. Nurit Jugend, Director and Producer

Music During The Holocaust



Between 1942-1945 in Nazi Germany, during the years of the 'Final Solution', Jews and various non-Jewish groups were being systematically persecuted and forced to live under inhumane conditions within walled ghettos and concentration camps. They lived with constant hunger, sickness, degradation and fear of death. By forcing such brutal circumstances upon them, the Nazis aimed to physically and psychologically destroy their victims.

It was under these circumstances that some found within themselves inner strength, hope and meaning. By nurturing creativity, education or writing diaries, they found mental shelter from their personal and communal catastrophe that they were thrust into. This kind of survival mechanism is often referred to as 'spiritual resistance'. It was through spiritual resistance that they managed to sustain some semblance of humanity, normalcy, dignity, inner-strength, and ultimately the will to fight for their lives.

The empowerment of 'spiritual resistance' is evident in the rich cultural life that the inhabitants of various ghettos were able to maintain, in spite of the horrific conditions they were forced to endure. The imprisoned community continued to provide education for their children, they cultivated theatre and other stage performances, organized poetry reading, encouraged art and music. Some musicians continued to play their instruments, compose new music and write songs.

In ghetto Terezin (Theresienstadt) the Nazis allowed Jewish leaders to form cultural and educational programs within the ghettos as a front, to quieten suspicions and global criticism about how prisoners were really being treated by the Nazis. By advertising to the world the cultural prolificacy coming from the ghettos, the Nazis were able to claim that no harm was being done to the prisoners, thus strengthening their own propaganda. Music in ghetto Terezin flourished; there were operas, concerts and choirs. Singers, composers, musicians and performers were allotted time to practice. They were released from physical work, and received more food in order to maintain suitable physical condition for their stage performances.

Music was meaningful to both the performers and their fellow inmates. It provided fleeting moments of pleasure, and a degree of emotional comfort, distraction and mental escape from the horrors of every-day life in the ghettos, as well as spiritual resistance and hope: "Music gave us so much, to escape even for a few moments to a 'normal' world," says Greta, who sang in the Brundibár Children's Opera in ghetto Terezin. Even though they could not escape their physical reality, Greta explains that "Music allowed us a complete disconnect and emotional escape from the daily life".

However, in concentration camps, such as Auschwitz, the circumstances of music-making were different. The Nazis used music to their advantage; they rounded up the talented inmates to form groups and ensembles that were intended to entertain the Nazis during holidays, meetings, and parties. At one point Auschwitz had six orchestras. The Women's Orchestra in Auschwitz-Birkenau was made up of thirty-six members and eight transcribers, under the musical direction of Alma Rose - the niece of Gustav Mahler. Similarly, Treblinka, Majdanek, Belzec, and Sobibór camps all had orchestras.

The Nazis valued music highly and often granted special treatment to those who had the skills to play a musical instrument. Their appreciation of music allowed some musicians to acquire better jobs, better living conditions, and more food and clothing for themselves and their loved ones. Additionally, the Nazis liked to have music playing as they marched prisoners to and from work, to ensure order and compliance at concentration camps. As deportation trains, crammed to the brim with new inmates, pulled into the station at the concentration camps, music was played to give the inmates the illusion that they had arrived at a place that valued culture and had civilized conditions.



Illustration by Ari Binus

The travesty for musicians, who were forced to play music in the camps, would haunt some of them for the remainder of their lives. In many cases, musicians were ordered to play as they watched their family and friends march into the gas chambers. For those musicians who possessed musical skills that were deemed "useful" by the Nazis, it was undoubtedly a horrific and traumatic experience, but nonetheless one that often saved their lives: "The cello really saved my life because to be in this orchestra was a way of survival, because as long as they wanted music they would be foolish to put us in the gas chambers," says Anita, who played in the Women's Orchestra in Auschwitz.

The suffering of the victims, under the Nazi regime, was reflected in their music and musical life. Music offered them a way to express their humanity in inhumane conditions, to escape from reality and give voice to their yearning for freedom, as well as to find comfort and hope. Whether it was Auschwitz, ghetto Terezin, ghetto Vilna, or any other concentration camp, the music that was composed and performed by musicians under these circumstances undoubtedly saved lives.