

SUBURBAN LIFE

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ROSALIND LULLOVE COOPERMAN

Work answers her questions

The Holocaust. What does it mean to me, a Jewish woman who learned about it second hand when she was a child.

A child who upon seeing grotesque sequence of numbers burned into the arm of a survivor was both horrified and curious. Like many my age, in the 50s, I saw raw examples of the Holocaust. I was old enough to hear the stories. And from documentaries, I saw flashes of pictures depicting the tragedy of human remains . . . skeletons. Too young to understand the real meaning of these events and too young to comprehend a concept called "Holocaust."

Flash forward. Many decades have passed since those early years. For the first time, as a result of a documentary project, I begin to understand.

For the first time, I can reflect upon the events of the Holocaust within the context of . . . and the world stood by."

Today, as I look back over my company's past three and a half years of effort on a documentary, entitled, "When Restraints Are Removed," I've begun to understand the implications of the Holocaust. No, it's not just Poland, or Germany, or powerful examples we cling to in stories like "Schindler's List."

For me, it's the actions of others in a world gone mad where a clear and decisive governmental decree was carried out to erase the existence of Jews in Europe.

The final solution! Gene would be the Sabbath candles lit by my grandmother interwoven with remembrances of religious holidays as well as the sound of the Yiddish language or memories of wonderful smells which came from her kitchen . . . and sadly, no tradition.

The shock of this reality came crashing in on me over and over as I stood, once again, in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek and Treblinka. In Auschwitz, I held page after page of crudely typed lists which logged for future generations to review names of people, young and old, alike, inventoried like cattle. From time to time on these same sheets, pencil notations were added indicating the date of death.

I saw documents and photos of men and women who carried cameras and other precious possessions to the cattle cars. Now and then, the tiny face of a small child would peek out from parents' arms. Eyes that looked right at you in anticipation of a journey.

It was the faces of elders - powerful images that reflected years of religious tradition against a backdrop of impending death. Beautiful faces amid the frantic chaos and steady rhythm of movement directed toward the trains.

The screening of archival footage and review of historic photographs produced in me a stark reality that if I had lived in Eastern Europe, I probably wouldn't even be here today. This produced in me a self examination, could I have survived?

Would I have had the wherewithal - the ability to survive?

Although it sounds simplistic, filming in Poland's death camps and reflecting upon survivor accounts, as well as the opportunity to review historic documents, I am to this day still horrified. I think about how little separates from that fine line in which the extreme mistreatment and annihilation of others is still a value.

Each time I have stood on the grounds of death camps, I have closed my eyes and tried to imagine what actually went on. Oral histories which we have filmed over the past three and a half years have floated in and out of my head while footage and photographs flashed in split second recall.

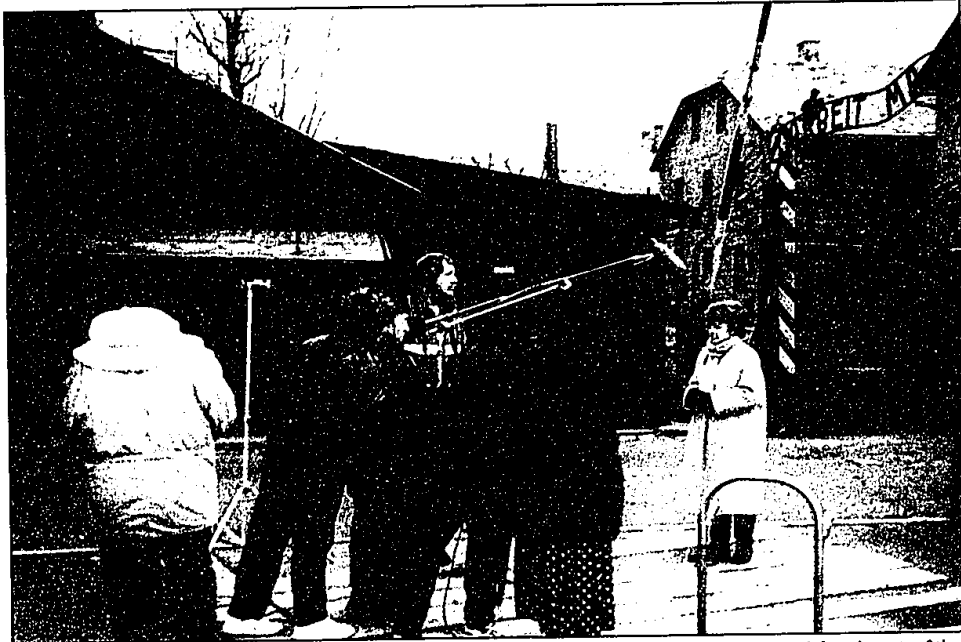
Without a doubt I have truly felt that it is impossible to comprehend the madness of a hellish world. My experiences at the camps and conversations with survivors makes the Holocaust is as real to me as the birth of my son. It's incomprehensible and an insult when people say that it never happened!

Over the years, as I've shared our production experiences, a few things are still very clear - the general population knows very little about the Holocaust. The little that is known is gleaned from what crept into the school system . . . and, of course, the popularity of "Schindler's List."

Unfortunately, this is not enough. It isn't enough to recall a few headlines and a few isolated facts. The viewing of "Schindler's List" is only a prerequisite to learning more about the Holocaust.

I only hope that in our "sound bite" society, that we don't tire of the Holocaust and move onto a new topic. We can't stop teaching the Holocaust. We need to instruct future generations, for they, too, need the lessons that, hopefully, we are only now, almost 50 years later, beginning to learn.

Rosalind Lullove Cooperman, is a Farmington Hills resident, and president of September Moon Production Network in Southfield. She can be reached at (810) 355-3700.



On location: The September Moon production team interviews an administrator of the Auschwitz memorial at the gate of the infamous prison camp.

Horrors remembered

Survivors visit concentration camps

A Southfield production crew headed by a Farmington Hills woman documents the heart-wrenching stories of Holocaust survivors. The film will be shown at the Holocaust Memorial Center of West Bloomfield.

BY TOM DELISLE
SPECIAL WRITER

Spring came early to Auschwitz this year.

By the first week of March, faint blades of grass started to show themselves across the vast grounds of the stark and barb-wired Birkenau complex near the Auschwitz camp headquarters in pastoral southwest Poland.

"There was no grass here then, even in summer," said Bernard Offen, staring at the wet ground. "Nothing green, just sand. Anything green was eaten."

Offen was brought to Birkenau as a 15-year-old prisoner in 1944. He is one of the few inmates to survive the Nazi murder machine that claimed the lives of 69 of his relatives.

Returning now as a 64-year-old man, Offen has spent a lifetime trying to deal with the nightmare that contorted his life. He had come back to the scene of his agony and loss as part of a Detroit-based documentary team commissioned by the Holocaust Memorial Center of West Bloomfield.

Horror documented

September Moon Production Network of Southfield is producing a video titled "When Restraints Are Removed," a historical and moral examination of the Jewish persecution in Nazi Germany. It is scheduled for showing this fall.

HMC director Rabbi Charles Rosenzweig of Oak Park and September Moon president and executive producer Rosalind Lullove Cooperman of Farmington Hills headed the eight-person crew that included Kevin Hewitt, a cameraman from Livonia and Ron Jaszczak, a lighting director from Detroit.

September Moon, with the assistance of Grace & Wild Studios of Farmington, has been at work with the HMC on "When Restraints Are Removed."

Cooperman, producer Will Lawson Sr. of Royal Oak and Rosenzweig have accompanied nine Holocaust survivors back to the scenes of the ghettos of Warsaw and Krakow, back to the desolation of such sinister places as Treblinka, Plaszow,

Majdanek, and Auschwitz-Birkenau.

They have conducted extensive oral history interviews with the survivors, four of whom live or have lived in the Detroit area, and they have videotaped international witnesses.

The documentary will ask viewers: "What would you have done?" The film is intended, said Rosenzweig, "to provide a lesson to individuals to ensure that all societies will be protected from the evils and hatred that are unleashed when moral restraints are removed."

Here at Birkenau, known as Auschwitz II, the major killing field of all the death camps with possibly a million fatalities, the video crew sets up its equipment. Looming over them is the fearsome arch, or "Death's Gate," through which trains passed into Birkenau, closing off the last view of the outside world ever to be seen by their doomed human cargo.

Offen, a former Ferndale resident, slowly shuffles along the rails, his head down. He walks along a rail line that abruptly stops about a half-mile ahead.

This short track, literally the end of the line, completed a network of tens of thousands of miles of railroads that spanned Eurasia and the Mediterranean, ultimately connecting them to an earthly hell. It stretched from Norway in the north to Athens

in the south, Cuen in the west to the ravaged villages of the Soviet front.

Rails of doom

These are the same rails that brought Offen and his 50-year-old father to the killing grounds in a cattle car awash in human waste and jammed with other terrified Jewish "prisoners" in August 1944: Indeed, their nightmarish three-and-a-half-day journey in that suffocatingly hot mobile jail cell was in itself a death sentence for some, and they were quite possibly the fortunate.

Auschwitz-Birkenau spreads across some 430 acres of former Polish farmland. Its crude barracks, once held more than 100,000 prisoners stacked, in its commandant's words, "in swarming ant-hills."

Now, the quiet serves to surely mock the sounds of terror that had filled the air of Auschwitz-Birkenau 24 hours a day from March 1942 to November 1944. Today, Offen tells his simple and infinitely painful story.

Jacob Offen, a simple shoemaker, had lied about his son's age to pass him off as older, and more likely to be selected as a camp laborer. SS men quickly made a cursory decision about the new arrivals' physical capacity for back-breaking work.

See HOLOCAUST, 5C

Quest for self-expression colors his view

BY DIANE GALE
STAFF WRITER

The spark in Stefan Derbich's eyes. The sarcasm in his quips. The bounce in his walk. These marks of character can be attributed to his one simple and unending quest:

"All my life I have been searching for that self-expression." He spoke in his native Polish language in his Farmington living room, with his daughter as translator. "I am continually not happy yet. I'm always searching."

At 86, that's what keeps his sketch pad in hand and his paint always nearby. He was born in Berlin in 1908 and moved to liberated Poland in 1918. His daughter, Emilia Palmer, a Farmington Hills resident, translated questions recently about when he knew he had talent and when he wanted to be an artist. His answer was quick.

"When I was born." Derbich studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznan and Warsaw from 1925 to 1931. He was awarded three independent scholarships. Art remained his life's work except from 1940-1945, during World War II. He was a prisoner of war



Center stage: Artist Stefan Derbich poses in his Farmington back yard with two of his compositions.

See ARTIST, 2C