



Secret Lives, Compelling Stories

By Laurel Angrist

The hidden lives of Jewish children saved from the Holocaust by non-Jewish rescuers are revealed in a new documentary slated to open at New York City's Quad Cinema on May 16.

"Secret Lives: Hidden Children and their Rescuers During WWII," a documentary by Academy Award Winner Aviva Slesin and Toby Appleton Perl, tells the stories of Jewish children hidden by non-Jewish families during the Nazi occupation and examines the long-term effects of the time they spent in hiding.

"I really thought you could just live your life and put the past behind you," said Slesin, who was hidden during the war herself. "But it kept creeping up." Smuggled out of a Lithuanian ghetto at nine months old, Slesin was hidden by a Christian couple for two years before her mother could return from the Stutthof concentration camp to claim her.

"I felt that I had been lucky. I never considered myself a survivor. I just felt that nothing terrible had happened in my life compared to others who had gone through the war. It caused a lot of silence," she explained.

The idea for "Secret Lives" began at an international conference of hidden children that Slesin attended in 1991. Fifteen hundred converged at the conference to share experiences similar to her own.

Reuniting with her rescue mother in 1994, she was moved to explore the unspoken bonds between hidden children and their rescuers. Together with Perl, writer and co-producer of the documentary, she set about collecting the stories and taping the encounters that would ultimately comprise the film.

"People were very much shaped by these experiences," said Perl. "Sustained connections were born. These were people who exceeded your expectations of humanity," she said of the rescuers.

"They took us in, not knowing how long the war would last, and not knowing which side would win," Slesin echoed.

Although Poland was the only country with an official death penalty for harboring Jews, it was common knowledge across occupied Europe that those caught doing so would suffer the same fate as the Jews and be sent to concentration camps.

"It was not that they did not fear, but that their character was such that they managed their fear," explained Perl. "They were not extremely brave, but extremely humanitarian."

"We didn't think of the danger," says one of the rescue mothers in the film. "We just wanted to save the child - a simple thing."

“Secret Lives” is a tribute to the courageous men and women who, in spite of grave consequences and enormous personal risk, did what they could to protect their fellow human beings.

Slesin and Perl are currently working on a book about hidden children and their rescuers that they hope will be available this fall. The book, which is being published by Pointed Leaf Press, will include many of the stories and images that, because of time constraints, could not be included in the film.

For more information please visit www.secretlives.org