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A haunting new documentary explains 'The Number on Great-Grandpa's Arm'

A scene from the HBO documentary "The Number on Great-Grandpa's Arm." (HBO)

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How can the stories of the Holocaust — horrific as they are — be conveyed to children?

How do you inform a young person about events that often are too difficult even for adults to face?

The question looms larger with each passing year, as the number of Holocaust survivors dwindles, their tragedies and triumphs eventually left to others to tell.

On Jan. 27 — International Holocaust Remembrance Day — HBO will address the quandary with the national television premiere of an impeccably crafted, warmly poetic film, “The Number on Great-Grandpa’s Arm.” Running approximately 19 minutes, the documentary looks at one family’s attempt to pass its story through the generations: We see 90-year-old Jack Feldman communing with his 10-year-old great-grandson, Elliott, about that blueish tattoo on Feldman’s forearm: A 17606.

Feldman received the infamous marking at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, but — unlike the rest of his family — he survived and could tell what happened. As often has been the case with Holocaust survivors, however, Feldman said little to his own children about these ghastly events, yet somehow was able to discuss the difficult subject with his grandchildren and their kids.

No one has been hungrier to devour that narrative than Elliott, whose passion for the story and empathy for his great-grandfather drive the film forward and render it at once bearable and heartbreaking. For Elliott knows more about the Holocaust than most children — perhaps more even than most adults — and he speaks of it with simplicity, profundity and understanding.

“In Germany, there was a lot of problems going on,” Elliott says to the camera early in the film, “and Adolf Hitler made a big speech and said, ‘Oh, the Jews

are causing all the problems. If we kill all the Jews, then we're going to have no more problems.'"

As the film proceeds, we see Elliott and his great-grandfather talking about what happened long ago in Feldman's native Poland. They sit close to one another on a sofa in Feldman's home, their arms casually intertwined, two distant generations speaking with an intimacy that inspires hope.

"I was so moved to see their body language, the way they snuggled up with each other," says the film's Emmy- and Peabody-winning director, Amy Schatz, who has made a career proving that children can educate the rest of us about the deepest, darkest issues in life.

"The way they hold hands and lean on each other," continues Schatz, "it's powerful to see that."

At one point in the film, Elliott asks his great-grandpa: "Do you know what happened to your father?"

"What happened?" repeats Feldman, straightforwardly. "No. I never saw him, I never knew it, what happened. I never knew what happened to my mother and my father. I never saw them again."

Elliott immediately, perhaps instinctively, caresses his great-grandfather's hand.

Observes director Schatz: "It's this nonverbal communication, where Elliott is saying: I understand how horrible that is, and I'm here for you. I love you."

At this moment — and in several others during the film — it's clear that we're witnessing intense communication about an extraordinarily painful subject: genocide, as experienced by someone you love.

“When he says I never saw my father again,” explains Sheila Nevins, the film’s executive producer and president of HBO Documentary Films, “you bleed for him.

“But he doesn’t ask you to,” adds Nevins, referencing the sober manner of Feldman’s statement. “He’s a special storyteller.”

Indeed, the film shows both Feldman and Elliott approaching their family’s history with candor but also with emotional restraint, which makes the conversation that much more compelling. Both the subjects and the filmmakers clearly realize that stories of great tragedy do not benefit from melodrama or overstatement. The film’s musical score, too, proves mercifully spare and unsentimental.

But “The Number on Great-Grandpa’s Arm” also brings the story to life via historic photos, archival film footage and animation, which serve as visual accompaniment to Feldman’s and Elliott’s discourse. The animation proves particularly effective, in effect providing a child’s-eye-view of long-past events.

Filmmakers Schatz and Nevins engaged artist Jeff Scher to create the images, which he did via a process called rotoscoping. Essentially, Scher and colleagues studied mountains of Holocaust-era photos and documentary footage, zeroing in on material that reflected Feldman’s story. Then Scher set about hand-painting each frame of the chosen imagery, creating 12 drawings for each second of the documentary’s eight minutes of animation. That required Scher to produce thousands of watercolor paintings.

What we see, then, is real-life, historic images made less harsh and more expressive via Scher’s animation. The scenes of pre-Nazi life in Feldman’s hometown — Sosnowiec, Poland — radiate the color and joy of Jewish life there in the 1920s and ’30s. When Hitler and the Nazis emerge in the film, the tones appropriately turn mostly to gray and black.

“It’s all based on contemporaneous footage of the various events,” Scher emphasizes. “When the Nazis come in, I removed pretty much all the color … and the bulk of the film is every possible shade of gray and flesh.

“I wanted to keep the flesh (tones) so it didn’t get cartoony and felt human, but at the same time keep it totally de-saturated, except for yellow triangles,” he adds, referring to the Stars of David that Jews were forced to wear, “and the eyes. The Nazis literally drained the life out of their lives.”

Because each of these images has been hand-painted by Scher, with no two frames exactly alike, the film’s animated sequences have a flickering quality suggesting old newsreels of the period. Rotoscoping, explains Scher, is “a way to import realistic human motion into animation.”

Or, as director Schatz puts it, “It gives you this feeling that this is timeless, that this is an archival newsreel, and it’s also something for today.”

Overall, the goal for the animation, says executive producer Nevins, was “not to euphemize, but to not horrify, and yet tell a horrifying story. … The challenge was not to sugarcoat something that would live for a long time as a film, and yet at the same time to stimulate man’s understanding of man’s inhumanity and the nothingness of genocide for all people, in all places.”

The filmmakers were focused on “the whole idea of telling true stories of horror without being too horrible, and I thought the film achieved it,” adds Nevins. “It achieved the brutality without making you not want to watch it or to turn away.”

That the film even was made might be considered coincidental, serendipitous or preordained, depending on your philosophical-religious leanings.

In May 2016, Nevins arrived early at a dinner and awards presentation for fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York.

“I was directed to the (museum) library, where I sat and made sure my lipstick was on,” quips Nevins, “and there was a shelf of children’s books.”

One of them — “The Number on My Grandfather’s Arm,” a 1987 volume by David A. Adler — caught her eye.

“I yanked it off the shelf,” says Nevins.

“I had a doctor who just retired who had numbers on his arm. He was a wonderful man. I loved him.”

Nevins remembers immediately thinking, “They’re all dying — we better do something” to tell their stories. “I took the book. I confessed this to the president of the museum.”

Not wasting a moment, Nevins began searching for Holocaust survivors at that dinner, and through intermediaries she met a woman who happened to be there: Elliott’s mother, Stacey Saiontz.

The dinner’s emcee “pulls me over to meet Sheila,” remembers Saiontz, who’s co-chair of the museum’s associates board and a member of the Next Generation Board of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

Nevins asked Saointz: “Do you know any Holocaust survivors?” recalls Saiontz.

“I say: Yes, my grandfather.”

Nevins responded: “Does he have a tattoo on his arm?”

“Yes,” answered Saiontz.

When Nevins inquired if she had any film footage of her grandfather, Saiontz again replied in the affirmative, for she had been documenting his story in various forms for years.

Nevins, now in high gear, took the book "back to HBO," she recalls. "I said we have to do this."

Still, "I'm never satisfied with beginners' luck," says Nevins, who with her team continued looking for other cross-generational survivor stories. Several were filmed, but the palpable chemistry between Saiontz's son, Elliott, and her grandfather, Feldman, ultimately made them the centerpiece of the completed film (footage of the other survivors filmed will be available elsewhere on HBO platforms).

"My grandfather — before me — he never talked about his story," says Saiontz. "He never spoke about it to my dad.

"But I wanted to know. I started asking. It was easier for him to talk about" with her and, eventually, with her sons Elliott and Jared.

Feldman first told Elliott the story when the boy was about 5 or 6.

"I want him to know what I went through," says Jack Feldman, born Srulek Feldman, and now 92.

How did young Elliott react?

"He was very upset" but interested, says Feldman.

Adds Elliott: "I was a little scared at first, but then it kind of grew on me."

As for the process of filming, "I did what I normally do," says Elliott, now 12, referring to the way he always questions his great-grandfather. "And I actually got more information from him while talking, because I got to spend a lot more time with him."

Though the film was designed for young audiences, the power of the conversation, the shimmering beauty of the animation and the universality of the subject surely beckon all ages.

“It’s like saying: Who’s a lullaby for?” says Nevins, who has noticed a wide range of viewers during screenings.

“The lights come up,” says Nevins, “and the adults have the tears.”

For Nevins, who will be retiring from HBO at the end of March but will continue making films, “Great-Grandpa’s Arm” stands out.

“This one has a special place in my heart,” she says.

“There’s something about the book and finding it — it was the best of what I could offer HBO in terms of discovery, that it wasn’t an assignment, it wasn’t something I found in a newspaper.

“It was a kind of a reverie.”

As is the completed film itself.

“There’s a song from ‘South Pacific,’” adds Nevins, as she begins to half-sing the lyrics from “You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught”:

“You’ve got to be taught

“To hate and fear

“You’ve got to be taught

“From year to year.”

“I would like to target kids before they get taught to hate,” adds Nevins.

“The Number on Great-Grandpa’s Arm” represents an important step in that cause.

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