

New Documentary, 'Refuge: Stories of the Selfhelp Home,' gives voice to the last generation of the Holocaust

By LISA PEVTZOW

"WE ARE THE LAST GENERATION," begins Edith Stern, a warm, exuberant woman of 91. "Soon, there will be no living people who can tell the story of the Holocaust."

Stern speaks with intensity, with passion and with heart-breaking sadness. As a young woman, she survived Auschwitz and Gross-Rosen concentration camps after escaping pregnant from a train carrying her to her death. In later life, she cared for aging survivors as the administrator at the Selfhelp Home, a little known community in Chicago that has sheltered more than 1,000 victims of Nazi persecution from Western Europe. Now, she is a resident there herself.

"Please listen to us," she says. "We are dying out."

As Holocaust institutions and Jewish communities wrestle with the question of how to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive after the survivors are gone, a new documentary, *Refuge: Stories of the Selfhelp Home* offers an answer.

Refuge, which premieres Sunday, June 3 at the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center, gives voice to this last generation. Reaching back more than 70 years, the hour-long film weaves together historical narrative, archival footage, and deeply personal testimony to explore the lives of six Chicagoans against the context of the Nazi cataclysm and how a small group of survivors and refugees came together to care for the oldest among them.

In their own words, these last eyewitnesses, like Stern, speak of the loss of family, of place, of separation, said Refuge Director Ethan Bensinger. But they also tell of renewal, of resilience, of finding love and creating new families, and of starting again in a new land.

"Each one saw his or her role in history and realized that they were the last eyewitnesses to these events and their stories had to be told," Bensinger said. Bensinger, who lives in Chicago, himself comes from a German-Jewish family who fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s. The documentary grew out of a project by Bensinger to capture the stories of the remaining survivors and refugees at the Selfhelp

Home on film.

Even 20 years ago, there were more than 125 survivors and refugees living at Selfhelp, Bensinger said. Today, just 12 of the original 30 people he interviewed in 2007 are still alive. "Within a few years, these people will no longer be with us," Bensinger said. "I feel a great responsibility to enable the younger generation to see these stories firsthand so that they understand the turmoil these people experienced and recognize their strength of character, their inner beauty, and what they were able to make of themselves in America."



Holocaust survivor Edith Stern will be featured in new documentary *REFUGE: Stories of the Selfhelp Home*, which will premiere June 3 at The Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center.

Educated and cultured, most of them from middle- and upper-class families, the residents of Selfhelp speak of *Kristallnacht* (known as "Night of the Broken Glass"), the coordinated series of attacks by the Nazis against Jewish communities in 1938, of finding refuge in England through the *Kindertransport*, escaping to the United States and Shanghai and hiding on estates and in castles in France. They also describe deportation to Theresienstadt and Auschwitz.

"These eyewitnesses teach us and future generations that strength in the face of adversity often comes from a sense of community built upon shared experience," said Rick Hirschhaut, executive director of the Illinois Holocaust Museum.

Selfhelp was founded in the late 1930s by a handful of young Jewish refugees who fled Nazi Germany to the safety of Chicago. Through prescience, pooled resources and a strong spirit of volunteerism, Selfhelp initially

provided housing, food, English classes and job placement services to their fellow Jewish émigrés and later, after the war, to survivors. In 1950, Selfhelp opened a residential home in Hyde Park for the oldest refugees and survivors, providing them with an atmosphere that reproduced some of the rich home and cultural life that they had lost. In the 1960s, with a waiting list topping 300, Selfhelp bought a second, much larger residential building on Argyle Street in Chicago.

In her spacious apartment at Selfhelp, Stern laughingly describes to a visitor about how her fluent German—the first language of so many of the elderly refugees and survivors—won her the job as administrator in the 1960s. She spoke of the meaning she found in caring for elderly survivors and émigrés, as she wished she could have cared for her own parents who perished in Auschwitz. And now, as she herself is old, of the great comfort

and kindness to live with others who share a similar past.

"As I got older," said Stern, whose sister also lives at Selfhelp, "Selfhelp is my reason to be alive." ■

The premiere of *REFUGE* will take place at 1 p.m. on Sunday,

June 3 at the Holocaust Museum & Education Center, 9603 Woods Dr., in Skokie, followed by a question and answer session with Director Ethan Bensinger and a reception. The film is free with Museum admission. For reservations, call (847) 967-4889.

To view a trailer of the film and for more information about arranging a showing, visit <http://storiesofselfhelp-film.com>.

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