

Documentary reveals determination of Chicago Jews to begin life anew in World War II aftermath

New Holocaust documentary features Uptown residents' resilience

BY GABRIELLE WEISS

A little known group of Uptown residents attended a candle lighting ceremony in honor of the first private screening of a new documentary, REFUGE: Stories of the Selfhelp Home, on April 19. The Selfhelp Home is a residential skilled nursing facility in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood with an incredible history born from the destructive forces of Nazism and the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center.

REFUGE is a one-hour documentary that highlights the diverse experiences of six Selfhelp residents and three of its founders. The world premiere will occur at the Holocaust Museum, 9603 Woods Dr., Skokie, on June 3. Directed by Ethan Bensinger, the documentary seamlessly intertwines



Selfhelp finance committee in 1970s.
Photo provided by Ruth Epstein

expert commentary by well-known historians with the residents' personal experiences of survival from Nazism and the Holocaust, as well as their resilience in rebuilding their lives in aftermath of that era.

“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,” explained Bensinger.

Founded in New York in 1935 by German refugees, Selbsthilfe-Selfhelp of Émigrés from Central Europe was meant to help meet the specific needs of Jews primarily from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia who were fleeing from Nazism and needed to begin life anew.

Chapters were also set up in Paris and in Chicago's Hyde Park. As the population of Western and Central European Jewish refugees and, then, Holocaust survivors grew so did Selfhelp. By 1950 the Chicago chapter became a stand alone, independent organization. They had created a com-



Engaged Selfhelp Home residents watch new documentary.

Photo by Timmy Samuel Starbelly Studios Photography

munity where sharing, understanding and growth could collectively occur within a supportive atmosphere after the horrific life-altering experience of persecution.

As the community began to thrive the need for a safe place and elder care remained. So in 1963, Selfhelp opened in Uptown on Argyle St.

“Selfhelp is a distinctive and special organization that was established early on to provide comfort, material support and a sense of community to those who had lost everything,” said Leon Stein, Professor Emeritus of Jewish History at Roosevelt Univ., who also participated in the film. “Selfhelp is an important part of Chicago Jewish history.”

Bensinger, a retired immigration lawyer, was inspired to film REFUGE in 2007, after creating an archive of personal interviews with 35 residents, founders and staff of Selfhelp. This archive can be viewed online or at the Sperlus Institute of Jewish Studies.

Bensinger was also very familiar with the group of residents as his mother volunteered at Selfhelp as an occupational therapist for 25 years. She now resides at the home. His grandmother also lived at Selfhelp 20 years ago. “I literally grew up listening to their stories. Selfhelp has been a big part of my life,” explained Bensinger, “I also realized that their accounts are significant as they give the unique perspective of the Western and Central European experience. I haven't seen that in other documentaries or films.”

Bensinger's parents were émigrés as well and fled Ger-

many in 1934 to live in Palestine where he was born. They later moved to New York and then to Rogers Park where he grew up.

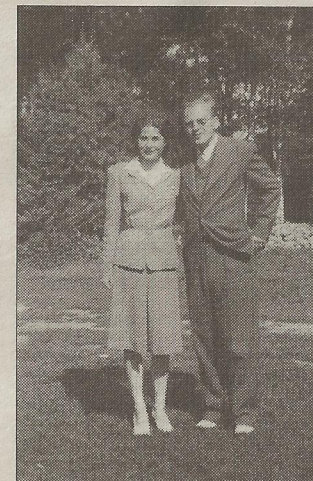
Although the Selfhelp Home population has aged, the home retains many of the cultural aspects of its early years, such as having social gatherings, classical music concerts and kaffeeklatsch, an informal gathering for coffee and conversation. “These people have great strength of character and have gone on to make very successful lives for themselves in America. They are fortunate to spend their lives in a home that in many ways replicates the homes they had in Europe.”

Bensinger explained that although he knew gornisht (Yiddish for “nothing”) about filmmaking, but believed that the story of this special group of people and the community they created needed to be shared.

“To see them come to life and hear their voice, to see their smiles, emotion; well, to see them in action and up close; you get a feel of who they are,” said Bensinger, “That's not something to be captured in books. It had to be film.” With the help of a talented team, the film took four years to make.

REFUGE: Stories of the Selfhelp Home will premiere on June 3 at 1 p.m. followed by a question and answer session with Bensinger and reception at the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Skokie. Bensinger is currently in talks to have the documentary air on PBS and will be showing the film at schools to help teach students about the Holocaust and about this somewhat unknown group of émigrés and survivors that worked together through their own efforts in order to thrive in America and Chicago.

To learn more about the upcoming premiere, the director, the Selfhelp Home, visit: <http://storiesofselfhelp-film.com>.



Rolf and Leni Weil in their early years, two leaders of Selfhelp.

Photo provided by Ruth Epstein