



SPRING 2012

SCENES

from *Selfhelp*

A NON-PROFIT SENIOR LIVING COMMUNITY OFFERING INDEPENDENT LIVING, ASSISTED LIVING, INTERMEDIATE AND SKILLED NURSING CARE

Strength, Resiliency and Perseverance... The People of Selfhelp

Ethan Bensinger's film – *Refuge: Stories of the Selfhelp Home*, brings to life the challenges some Western European Jews faced in their quest to escape Nazi persecution.

The story of Selfhelp has been told many times, by several people (the writer of this article included), mostly in written form. To capture the true essence of Selfhelp, one individual decided to let the people, in their own voices, exposing their image on camera...tell their stories. Ethan Bensinger, a long-time supporter of Selfhelp with several family ties to the organization, was the driver behind this initiative. He gently coaxes each heart-rending personal story from these survivors and encourages them to talk about a subject that many have pushed to the furthest corner of their minds...their immigration from Western Europe during the Nazi regime.

A portion of the film focuses on the three founders who are current volunteers as well as board members, and escaped Nazi Germany when they were in their 20s.

The stories are compelling and tragic, and often the individual's pain and loss is palatable, but at the same time, they are incredibly inspiring. In an interview with Ethan Bensinger, the first-time filmmaker discusses how the film came to be.

"I got involved with Selfhelp as an outsider looking in for 40 years. My mother is turning 100 and was a volunteer in the arts and crafts department at Selfhelp for 25 years. She is an Occupational Therapist, so her skills were very helpful in this area. I visited Selfhelp with her in the 1970s and then my grandmother became a resident in the 1980s and other relatives lived there as well. Today, my mother is a resident and has lived at Selfhelp for the past 10 years. I have come twice a week for meals, concerts, Shabbat

and other celebrations for years," explains Ethan.

Ethan says it all began in 2007, when he bought a Sony tape recorder and began videotaping his mother to capture the story of her immigration from Germany to Palestine and then to America and all that entailed. Completing that project, he decided to create an archive of memories of the other residents; there were victims of the Holocaust, camp survivors and refugees in this group of 30 people. He asked them the same questions about their youth growing up, religious practices, how they survived the war and how they came to America. Bensinger captured their stories on DVDs, which are now housed at Selfhelp, gave a set to the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, and to the Leo Baech Institute, where they were uploaded to the internet.

This inspired Ethan to produce a film. He selected six individuals who were living at Selfhelp and the three still living founders of Selfhelp. Two main themes emerged – the spirit of volunteerism and the incredible resilience of the people who immigrated to this country. A portion of the film focuses on the three founders who are current volunteers as well as board members, and escaped Nazi Germany when they were in their 20s. These three individuals, Rolf Weil and his wife, Leni, and Gerry Franks each had their own story to tell.

According to Ethan, "these founders felt the need to take care of Oma and Opa and other German Jewish immigrants. Their parents or grandparents were sitting home alone and didn't speak English,



Filmmaker Ethan Bensinger and his mother, Rachel Bensinger, a resident of Selfhelp.

which further isolated them. In 1950, the founders raised enough money to purchase an old mansion on Drexel Avenue, which housed 18 people, and as word spread and the need grew, they later added an addition and then purchased a larger home on the north side of Chicago. All the services were provided entirely by volunteers, and with few exceptions, there was no paid staff."

The three founders mentioned got involved with Selfhelp in the early 1940s and have remained active volunteers of the organization for over 70 years. These individuals need to be acknowledged and celebrated and part of the film deals with their continued involvement in the organization. Ethan set out to capture the Western European experience, which is different from the Eastern European experience that has been portrayed in many stories of the Holocaust. People know of the Eastern European plight through films like *Schindler's List*, but there are fewer widely

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The People of Selfhelp (continued)

known films that capture the varied experiences of immigrants like the people Ethan interviewed.

A Story That Had to Be Told

Ethan set about to make his film. He hired a producer, an editor and cinematographers in 2008. In 2011, Ethan hired a composer to write an original score for the film. The project was mainly self-funded and with the help of some foundations, individuals and families who are associated with Selfhelp, he was able to complete the film over the course of a few years, working on it as time allowed.

Ethan explained the experience he had while gathering the stories for the film, “many of the stories are gut wrenching and dealt with the separation of families and place and incredible losses. People who were fortunate enough to have the opportunity to leave Germany after Kristallnacht – these families were uprooted from their homes and had to find refuge in other parts of the world. My mother came from a well-established upper middle class home and immigrated to Palestine and that is what prompted me to capture these kinds of stories on film.”

One resident, Paula Tristch tells of her experience hiding in France during the war years and

Horst Abraham and his parents found refuge in Shanghai, but could not get enough permits from the Japanese government for the whole family, so one sister had to remain and was eventually sent to Auschwitz. Stories are also told of the separation of families on the Kindertransport and their hope of one day being reunited. Some of the Western European stories are about hiding or immigration to foreign countries, while two stories, those of Edith Stern and Hannah Messinger, hauntingly detail their experiences in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz.

Each story is so different, compelling and often sad. However, you are left realizing that these people, who have lived through these horrific experiences, have emerged strong and became productive individuals in their new home - America. Their experience may have hardened them, but they persevered and made good lives for their families. All the people Ethan spoke with are in their 90s, while one resident is over 100 years of age. They are charming and beautiful, and at times, even funny. That sense of resilience and strength of character is the underlying story and simply had to be told.

Ethan felt the creation of Selfhelp and the commitment of the volunteers who had the vision of continuing the essence of European

life was something to celebrate and acknowledge. The Selfhelp founders did all they could to replicate the lives that their parents and grandparents had lost. This included traditional Shabbat celebrations, coffee klatches and cultural events like concerts at the home. Selfhelp represents a rebirth of the Western European lifestyle in a very special place.

Ethan hopes that his film will, in his words, “encourage the spirit of volunteerism and show how just a few dedicated people can change people’s lives and truly make a difference. I want to show the film in schools and help our children understand how their involvement can change the world, one person at a time. The film is riveting, the stories are sad, but the triumph of human spirit prevails and it is important for our children to hear the message of a generation that is disappearing.”

A private screening at Selfhelp will be held for residents on Holocaust Remembrance Day, April 19. On June 3, the film will be premiered to the general public at the Illinois Holocaust museum. A special screening of *Refuge: Stories of the Selfhelp Home* for members of Selfhelp, their families, guests and community members will be announced soon. Watch for more information coming soon!



Ethan Bensinger was inspired to create **REFUGE** in 2007, after collecting an archive of personal interviews with 35 residents, founders and staff of Selfhelp. Today, this archive can be found at Selfhelp, the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies in Chicago, and online, courtesy of the Leo Baeck Institute in New York.

Ethan’s parents and grandparents were forced to flee the Nazi regime in the 1930s for a new life in Palestine. Ethan was born after the State

of Israel was founded and then moved with his family to America in 1955. This family refugee experience led Ethan to his chosen profession as an immigration lawyer, and for 25 years, Ethan served as the Managing Director of the Chicago office of a global immigration law firm. Since his retirement from law, Ethan has been involved in volunteer and philanthropic opportunities, as well as turning his love of gathering historical narratives into a new career in filmmaking.

For more information about **REFUGE**, visit www.storiesofselfhelp-film.com.



Mark your calendar Upcoming Events at Selfhelp

The Selfhelp Home is pleased to present our calendar of events for April 2012 through September of 2012. If you are interested in attending any of these events, please contact **Barbara Snower** at **773.271.8232** to make a reservation as seating is limited. Schedules are subject to change without notice.

April 2012

- April 1 2:30 p.m. Marla Darjaar, Piano and Rob Cunningham, Tenor
- April 8 2:30 p.m. Winston Choi, Piano
- April 15 2:30 p.m. Natalia Kogan and Irina Feoktistova, “Four Hands Piano”
- April 18 2:00 p.m. Tanja Bechtler, Cello and Nina Kogan, Piano
- April 22 2:30 p.m. Tanya Melamed, Piano
- April 24 2:00 p.m. Andrea Silverstrelli, Italian Bass and Irina Feoktistova
- April 29 2:30 p.m. Legacy Girls Playing 30’s and 40’s Music

May 2012

- May 6 2:30 p.m. Alex Koffman, Violin and Friends
- May 13 2:30 p.m. Kimberly Jones, Soprano and Luciano Laurentiu, Piano
- May 20 2:30 p.m. Saori Chiba and Paul Dykstra, “Two Pianos, Four Hands” Recital
- May 27 2:30 p.m. David and Sara Hou, Child Prodigies Piano

June 2012

- June 3 2:30 p.m. Still Acting Up – Community Play Group
- June 10 2:30 p.m. Karen Nelson, Violin and Piano
- June 17 2:30 p.m. Paul Raduleseu, Baritone and Luciano Laurentiu, Piano
- June 24 2:30 p.m. Modal Music – Jewish Music

Selfhelp's Resident Authors

Residents of Selfhelp are a very talented group of people. Many of them paint, sew, knit and create other wonderful works of art. In fact, some former residents have displayed their work in galleries for others to enjoy. We have also discovered that several residents are published authors and although their work is varied, one common theme emerges when they discuss their writings...great pride in seeing their hard work in printed form.

Please meet some of Selfhelp's current authors:

Birdie Gurvitz: Birdie started writing when she was just a child and her mother encouraged her to keep doing so. She wrote three children's books entitled: "Learning about Witches," "Phone Calls to Zelda," and "Learning about Dragons." It was important for her to get an education and writing played a role in her learning process. She feels "wonderful" when she looks at the three books on her bookshelf and has a sense of accomplishment knowing they may bring joy to others in the future.

In fact, Birdie's life has been an inspiration to others. Her story became part of a book called "Retired? Get Back in the Game" written by Jack and Elaine Wyman in 1994. She was one of 37 retirees who were the focal point of the book and provided her insight on the benefits of lifelong learning.



Selfhelp resident and author, Birdie Gurvitz, proudly displays her three children's books.



Horst Abraham

his life and immigration from Berlin to Shanghai

Abraham's novel portrays the life of a man who escaped the unthinkable, endured the scarcities of life in a strange and foreign land, who lived and achieved the American dream because he never gave up.

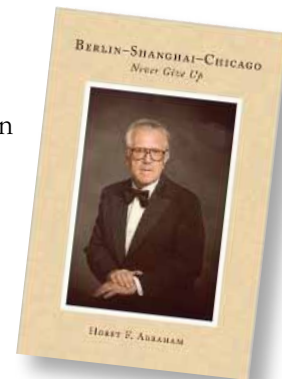
and ultimately, his arrival and life in Chicago. His is a tale of survival and the book, "Berlin-Shanghai-Chicago: Never Give Up," was first written in German and later translated into English.

"Horst Abraham is an American success story which has to be told. 'Berlin-Shanghai-Chicago: Never Give Up' is a personal and moving story of a brilliant man who was able to escape Berlin during Nazi time, endure the deprivation of living in Shanghai and came to America, becoming very successful in several different endeavors. The subtitle, *Never Give Up*, portrays the life of a man who escaped the unthinkable, endured the scarcities

Horst Abraham: Starting your writing career at 91 may seem highly unusual, but when you consider it is one's life story, the timeframe is much more understandable. Throughout his life, Horst Abraham was encouraged to write about

of life in a strange and foreign land, who lived and achieved the American dream because he never gave up. His story will move you to tears, cause you to laugh, and inspire you to hope. This Jewish man is symbolic of Jewish people worldwide and the nation of Israel, as they have persevered against all odds and will never give up." Reverend Patrick Neff, Church Ministries Director, the Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc. – *Book Review*

Horst's book has sold 368 copies to date and is available on Amazon.com. Horst's story is also featured in Ethan Bensinger's film.



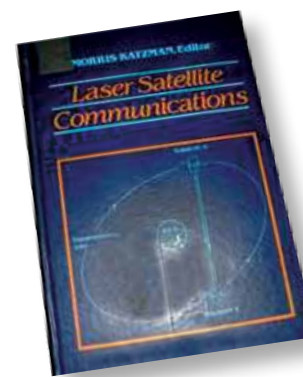
Morris Katzman: Morris' writings took a very different turn. While in his 40's, he wrote several papers that were never published and later wrote a very technical, book called "Laser Satellite Communications" that sold a few thousand copies.

The book was published by Prentice-Hall in 1987. He is an expert on the topic of satellite communication and felt it was important for others to learn about this technology. It was

the encouragement of his wife that pushed him to have it published.



Morris Katzman



July 2012

- July 1 2:30 p.m. Henik Karapetyan, Violin
- July 8 2:30 p.m. Hideko Amano, Flute and Tatyana Steponva, Piano
- July 15 2:20 p.m. Lynne Sorkin, Singing Show Tunes
- July 22 2:30 p.m. Nazar Dzhuryn, Cello and Piano Concert
- July 29 2:30 p.m. Michael Orlinsky, Baritone singing Opera Music

August 2012

- Aug. 5 2:30 p.m. Mark Valenti, Piano
- Aug. 12 2:30 p.m. Jubal Music presents: William Bennett, Tenor
- Aug. 19 2:30 p.m. Prism Chamber Ensemble, Woodwind Quintet
- Aug. 26 2:30 p.m. Sandy Finkel, Piano and Alex Koffman, Violin – Over a Century of Musical Genius: American Jewish Composers

September 2012

- Sept. 2 2:30 p.m. Susan Merdinger and Irina Feoktistova, "Four Hands, Two Pianos"
- Sept. 9 2:30 p.m. Trevor Stephenson, Harpsichord
- Sept. 16 2:30 p.m. Warren Moulton, Tenor and Gabriella Scanu, Piano
- Sept. 23 2:30 p.m. Lake Effect Trio, Flute, Viola and Harp – All Claude Debussy program
- Sept. 30 2:30 p.m. Sapphire Woodwind Quintet