

Only a Number Takes Top Prize at Jersey Shore Film Festival

Steven Besserman shares his ailing mother's Holocaust memories in award winning documentary

By Christine A. Scheller

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"A17855: This became my only identity. This was Auschwitz," Aranka Besserman says in the film tribute to her memories of the Holocaust that her son Steven Besserman directed.

Only a Number premiered at the Garden State Film Festival in March and won the Best Feature Documentary prize in a field of about 100 documentaries at the Jersey Shore Film Festival last week.

"This is where my mother lost her mother. This is where she lost all human dignity. This is where she became only a number," Steven says as he narrates her story from the fairytale-like places where it unfolded.

Hers is an unlikely story of finding lasting love amidst unspeakable evil. It was after Aranka miraculously escaped the gas chamber at Auschwitz and was transferred to Waldlager, a camp located in a forest so that Allied forces wouldn't see the work being done there, that the horror was, in some measure, redeemed by a romance that has lasted a lifetime.

"I kept thinking about the boy with the love in his eyes," Aranka, a Hungarian, says of Josef, the Polish prisoner with whom she did not share a common language.

"For now, ours would be a forbidden love," she says. "How can you love when you're only a number? But we were in love."

"The Holocaust was so horrific," says Steven in another scene. "If not for the Holocaust, my parents would never have met and I would never have been born, so I have always felt a profound sense of irony about the Holocaust."

In a section of the notebooks upon which the film is based, Aranka wrote that she sometimes thought she had lived so she could tell others what she saw and experienced.

"The way I have grappled a bit with that irony is that sometimes I think I'm here to keep telling that story. That's one of the reasons I made the film," Steven said after a screening Sunday night at the Axelrod Performing Arts Center in Deal.

When he was a newlywed in his 20s, he asked his mother to write her story down for his future children and grandchildren. Six weeks later, she gave him three notebooks overflowing with her recollections.

As those recollections began to fade from dementia three decades later, Steven decided to turn them into a film. With the notebooks as a guide and "her words rolling around" in his head, he went back to the places she had written about to "find the remnants of the past in the present."

"I always wanted to keep my mother's voice," Steve said. "That became my guide to making the documentary."

He drew upon years of experience working in television and video production and was inspired by Daniel Mendelsohn's Holocaust memoir *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* and *The Gleaners and I*, a first person narrative film by Agnes Varda, he said. A Hungarian woman narrates Aranka's memories as archival photos and location shots of Steven propel the narrative forward.

"This is my first documentary feature and something I've been carrying around for 35 years," Steven said.

During a discussion after the screening, he and his sister Eleanor Besserman said their father was "closed" about what he had suffered, but their mother was effusive in sharing her memories with them throughout their lives.

"When you're a young kid and you see numbers on your parents' arms, you wonder what that is," Steve said. "Or why Billy and Janey have grandma and grandpa, and where's my grandma and grandpa."

Eleanor doesn't remember how old she was when her mother began telling her about the Holocaust, but she was very young, she said.

"I'm still very affected by it," Eleanor said.

Only a Number will show at the Santa Rosa International Film Festival in California next month and is being recommended by the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education for grades 7-12, Steve said.

"My number one goal is to get it out there and have as many people see it as possible," he said.