

TROPICAL LIFE M

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HOLOCAUST

Horrors of Treblinka subject of Miamian's powerful documentary

BY HOWARD COHEN
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"Another film about the Holocaust? It's kind of been done," the Miami TV producer/director behind documentary features *Nixon's the One: The '68 Election* (2010), *Muhammad Ali: Made in Miami* (2008) and *Plagues: The Ebola Riddle* (2001), said of his initial feeling.

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WILLENBERG

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• TURN TO TREBLINKA, 4M

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• TREBLINKA, FROM 1M

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But finding a survivor to recount the horrors would be difficult. The Nazis went to great lengths to cover up their crimes at Treblinka. Bodies were exhumed and burned on pyres of railroad logs, and trees were planted on the grounds. Unlike work camps like Auschwitz and Dachau, where remnants of gas chambers revealed their ghosts, Treblinka hid hers for more than half a century.

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TREBLINKA: The squat building hid the horrors inside. An estimated 900,000 Jewish men, women and children were put to death here in a period of 13 months in 1942-1943 at the height of World War II.



TREBLINKA TOURS: Samuel Willenberg leads visitors on a tour of the Treblinka site, which the Nazis obliterated as the war wound down so as to hide their crimes.

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ence of Samuel Willenberg, now 92 and the last known living survivor of the Treblinka death camp.

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"Samuel wasn't like that. He's a born survivor and a storyteller. I've been a journalist since I was 16 and I'm in my 60s now, so I've heard a lot of stories. My jaw fell open," Tomlinson said. "It was such a staggering story. And not only was he able to illustrate his story verbally, but he told it with such a cocktail of emotions flowing through his body. One minute he was angry. One minute in tears. One minute laughing, telling some cynical joke about life in Treblinka. You couldn't take your eyes off of him as he was telling his story."

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tow but was herded, along with the town's entire Jewish population of 6,000, aboard a cattle train bound for Treblinka. Within hours, all would be dead. Except Willenberg. A member of a nearby Jewish work camp recognized him and pulled him aside to join a labor force.

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If you go

A complimentary premiere screening of *Treblinka's Last Witness*, with a discussion moderated by Holocaust expert Michael Berenbaum, will take place at 6 p.m. Tuesday at Olympia Theater at Gusman Center, 174 E. Flagler St., Miami. Check ticket availability at tickets.gusmancenter.org.

Treblinka's Last Witness airs on WLRN-Channel 17 at 8 p.m. Oct. 28, 10 p.m. Nov. 2 and 8 p.m. Nov. 6.

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'Last Witness' of Treblinka keeps camp's memory alive in film, art

BY DAVID ADAMS AND ZACHARY FAGENSON

MIAMI | Mon Oct 27, 2014 6:00pm EDT



(Reuters) - Samuel Willenberg, the last known living survivor of the notorious Nazi extermination camp Treblinka is nearing the end of a life's mission to tell of the horrors that he saw there.

Now 92, his remarkable story, featured in a documentary film produced by Miami public TV channel WLRN, is spurring efforts to fulfill that mission by building an educational museum at the camp's site in a remote pine forest in eastern Poland.

"Treblinka's Last Witness," airing on Tuesday, tells the story of how Willenberg, a Polish Jew, became a forced laborer at Treblinka where his two sisters were among the 900,000 Jews sent to their deaths. He later escaped during a camp revolt, one of barely 100 Jews to survive the place.

A history professor he met in the camp told him: "You're not like other Jews, you have blonde hair, you know how to survive," Willenberg recalled in an interview during a visit to Miami for a

premiere of the film last week before a packed audience, many of them relatives of Holocaust victims.

"You have to run away from this," the professor told him. "It will be your mission to tell people about what happened here."

Willenberg, who after World War Two moved to [Israel](#), married and worked for 40 years as a civil servant, has dedicated his retirement to memorializing what happened by creating a series of 15 haunting bronze sculptures, each capturing a scene from the camp, as well as leading educational visits there.

On Tuesday Willenberg will also be a guest of honor alongside Israeli President Reuven Rivlin at the opening of the main exhibition at Warsaw's newly built Museum of the History of Polish Jews, a project that sets out to recall not just how Jews in Poland died, but how they lived.

Of Poland's pre-war population of 3.5 million Jews, only a few tens of thousands remain, their place in the nation's history and culture having been largely eradicated.

Only recently has Poland started to re-connect with its role in history as a home for 1,000 years to one of the world's biggest Jewish communities.

LARGELY UNTOUCHED

Polish Jews have also played a major role in American history, with an estimated 80 percent of U.S. Jews able to trace their roots back to ancestors in Poland.

Unlike other Nazi concentration camps such as Auschwitz, Dachau and Buchenwald, where efforts have been made to educate visitors, the Treblinka site has been left largely untouched after the Nazis demolished it near the end of the war in a desperate effort to cover up their deeds.

All that exists there today are some railroad ties leading up to the remains of a station platform set among large stones.

"It's a very moving place, but there's nothing to tell the story," said the film's British-born director, Alan Tomlinson.

"I have heard a lot of stories in my career, but no-one has ever told me a story like Samuel's," Tomlinson, 66, told the audience at the premiere. "And Samuel is such a great story-teller," he added, crediting Willenberg's lucid passion and vivid memory with providing the film's powerful impact.

Experts say that much more could be done at the current site to help visitors understand the monstrosity of Treblinka. Historians have called it the Nazis' most efficient death camp

which, operating like a factory assembly-line, they killed almost 1 million people in barely 13 months in 1942-1943.

"It's an intuitive, emotional understanding that concentrates beautifully the sense of loss, but it's wordless and doesn't articulate what was lost there," said Holocaust scholar Michael Berenbaum.

"You experience the presence of absence and the absence of presence," he added. "Treblinka is a place where a crime is not manifest."

Berenbaum said an anonymous donor has already committed \$1 million to the museum project. During his Miami visit Willenberg met with a number of wealthy Polish immigrants who pledged to see the museum built.

"Thanks to Samuel's extraordinary persistence, the project now has real life," said Tomlinson.

After the film airs on Oct. 28 on WLRN in south Florida, it will be distributed nationally through the PBS network.

(Writing by David Adams; Editing by [Eric Walsh](#))

83°

Miami filmmaker finds 'Treblinka's Last Witness' for powerful Holocaust film

BY HOWARD COHEN - HCOHEN@MIAMIHERALD.COM

10/17/2014 8:00 AM | Updated: 10/17/2014 3:52 PM



GUARD DUTY: A Gestapo guard oversees a row of Jewish people who were lulled into a false sense of security. The Nazis created mock transit stations, complete with nonworking painted clocks, and posted time table schedules to give the impression that their Jewish victims were solely there for transport to colonies where they would be safe. This ruse maintained order. Instead, an estimated 900,000 Jewish men, women and children were killed at Treblinka. Told they were in transit to a colony they were, instead, organized into lines that separated men and women, and were herded into gas chambers. WLRN

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Related



TREBLINKA TOURS: Samuel Willenberg leads visitors on a tour of the Treblinka site, which was obliterated by the Nazis as the war wound down so as to hide their crimes on the grounds. | WLRN

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SunSentinel

Treblinka's last witness makes surprise appearance



Samuel Willenberg, the last known living survivor of the Treblinka death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland, is warmly received during a surprise appearance for the screening of the documentary "Treblinka's Last Witness." (Staff photo/Orit Ben-Ezzer)

By Sergio Carmona,
South Florida Sun-Sentinel
contact the reporter

The recent world premiere film screening of the emotional, moving, and powerful documentary "Treblinka's Last Witness" was followed by a surprise appearance by the star of the film.

The film, produced by WLRN Public Television, screened at Olympia Theater at Gusman Center in Miami to more than 1,000 people. It features a first-hand account by Samuel Willenberg, the last known living survivor of the Treblinka death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland. The film features sculptors of the victims that Willenberg, who is still haunted 70 years later by the horrors he witnessed as a young forced laborer at the camp, created to immortalize the Treblinka story as well as archival footage and photographs from the period. It also tells a personal story of the annihilation of Polish Jewry in the death camps built by the Nazis. Following the screening, a film discussion with Holocaust scholar Michael Berenbaum took place and Willenberg, who is now 92, his wife Ada and their daughter Orit all introduced themselves to the audience. The family flew in

from Tel Aviv to attend the screening and they were moved by the way they were received by the audience.

“I’m very proud of this. For me, I’m so surprised to receive such a reception,” Willenberg said. “I was not expecting such an incredible reception.”

Willenberg told the audience that this reception was the greatest honor he has ever received.

“I have all kinds of medals, honors, and awards, but those don’t even compare to anything I received tonight,” Willenberg told the audience.

The documentary airs on WLRN-Ch.17 at 10 p.m. on Nov. 2, and at 8 p.m. on Nov. 6.

“WLRN wants to be South Florida’s story-teller and the reason why we did this project is that we don’t only do local stories and regional stories, but we also do international stories that we feel are going to resonate with our community,” said Adrienne Kennedy, executive producer of WLRN. “We have a large Jewish community here and we feel that we’re serving this community with this story and we were very lucky to find Samuel Willenberg to tell the story.”

Alan Tomlinson, the film’s director/producer, said he’s talked to a lot of people over the years who have told him their stories but nobody has ever told him a story like Willenberg’s.

“When I met him, I said ‘I’m going to make this film because I think this is a story that people are going to want to hear,’” Tomlinson added.

An 80-page comprehensive study guide for the film is available to educators at <http://socialsciences.dadeschools.net>.

Miriam Klein Kassenoff, host chairperson for this event and educational specialist for Holocaust Studies for Miami-Dade County Public Schools who is the author of the study guide, said the film’s world premiere was “as powerful a moment in Holocaust documentary history that one will see in their lifetime.”

“During the film there was not a sound to be heard in the audience except that of the strong-willed voice of Sam Willenberg,” Kassenoff added. “I have worked with this film project writing the study guide for the past four years and even I, knowing what the film was about, was absolutely riveted to the screen.”

An audience member, Rabbi Tom Heyn of Temple Israel of Greater Miami, said the documentary was “extremely moving” and “well-researched” and also said that the Willenberg family appearance just blew everyone away.

“After hearing their unbelievable story, to see them in person was unexpected thrill,” Heyn added.

Rabbi Solomon Schiff of Miami Beach, who also attended the event, thought Willenberg’s appearance was the icing on the cake for the evening.

“After a powerful experience that all of us had, we saw a living witness that was able to show us the ability to survive and to strive and to be able to put that tragedy into focus so that people can look at and learn on what can happen when bigotry and hatred prevail,” Schiff said.

Andrew Hall, the Holocaust Memorial Miami Beach’s committee chair who also attended the screening, said the film tells two stories, one of Treblinka and the other of “a phenomenally courageous man who survived and was a hero in every respect.”

“His escape from Treblinka is worthy of an epic film standing alone and the film itself forces us to remember the bleakest time in human history,” Hall added.