



COMMENTARY

# NEVER FORGET

## A Staten Island Holocaust survivor story, on film



Portrait of Holocaust survivor Margot Cappell holding a photo of her parents. Her biggest regret was not being able to save them.

Photos by Shira Stoll, for Staten Island Advance



Holocaust survivor Hannah Steiner holding a portrait of her mother, who died just after being liberated from Auschwitz.



Hannah Steiner and Advance videographer Shira Stoll, who made a documentary on Holocaust survivors, pose for a portrait.



Shirley Gottesman, an Auschwitz survivor, shows her tattoo from the camps.

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“Never Again.” A phrase we are hearing a lot in 2018. In 2018, students are saying it in a plea to feel safe in school again, just months after a crazed gunman massacred 17 people in a Florida high school. The dead: Fourteen teenagers. Three adults.

In 2018, Jewish seniors are saying it in a plea to remind people that the Holocaust began 80 years ago, lasted seven deadly years, and could happen again somewhere in the world if we do not remain vigilant.

It's near impossible to calculate the staggering number of men, women and children murdered. Six million Jews. Six million others. Perhaps more.

Before you think this has nothing to do with Staten Island, think again.

Scores of Holocaust survivors are our Staten Island neighbors. They might not have come here immediately after the physical horror of the Holocaust ended for them. But they did come here, like so many did, seeking a better existence. To start a family. To find a better life for their children.

SILive and the Staten Island Advance has produced a powerful documentary that tells the story of 10 Staten Island Holocaust survivors.

It is a story at first of shocking despair. Children torn from their parents. Their parents tortured and killed.

But it is also a story of resilience, of the fierce determination within these 10 Staten Islanders who fought so desperately to survive.

The film debuted Tuesday night at Wagner College's Holocaust Center, sponsored by Wagner, the Jewish Community Center and the Advance.

It debuts today on SILive.

The documentary was conceived and produced by Advance/SILive multimedia specialist Shira Stoll.

Shira brings to life the emotional and heartbreaking stories of the young Jewish children's capture and their unspeakable existence in the death camps. How they navigated life after their liberation, oftentimes a horror itself.

Marrying. Starting families. Experiencing grandchildren. Great-grandchildren. Living normal lives after a childhood of abject horror, finding happiness on Staten Island.

Growing up in a conservative Jewish household, Shira — at just 25 — has a deep understanding of the horror of the **SEE FILM, A8**

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Scenes from the Café Europa: A Celebration for Holocaust Survivors event at the Staten Island Jewish Community Center. The event celebrates the lives of the Holocaust Survivors and gives them an opportunity to meet each other, sing songs, eat food, and spend time with their families. Photos by Shira Stoll, Staten Island Advance, Shira Stoll

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Holocaust survivor Goldie Schwartz.



Holocaust survivor Gabi Held

### FILM

FROM A1

Holocaust because of time she spent listening and learning from her babysitter, a woman named Helen — a concentration camp survivor.

Helen began caring for Shira as her parents worked when she was 2. By the time she was 8, when Helen had become her “third grandma,” Helen decided to share her story.

“To hear what she went through was really emotional for me,” Shira said. But Helen continued to share her story because Helen knew we can never forget.

The documentary project was born as Shira covered an event last June at the Island's Jewish Community Center. Called Café Europa, it is a unique program for Staten Island's Holocaust survivors with a focus on celebration and socialization.

“I loved the event. I knew all the songs ... all the dances. I was really moved.”

She immediately began to formulate a plan to share the Staten Island survivor stories, much the way Helen shared her story. The actual project began in September.

At first, it was thought there were approximately 15 survivors on Staten Island. As Shira did her research and interviews, she found others. Today, we think there are 40 or more.

So important we feel is this documentary and so important to the Staten Island community, the Advance is in discussion with Staten Island private, Catholic and public schools to make it part of the fall curriculum.

The 23-minute documentary featuring 10 survivors is only part of the overall project.

Every survivor we have discovered will be the subject of a shorter video profile. In addition, there will be a special printed section in the Advance sometime within the next few months, profiling the many survivors we have found.

Shira has been on staff at the Advance since May 2017. She holds a bachelor's degree in photo illustration from Syracuse University and is a master's degree candidate at the school's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communication.

— Brian J. Laline is the executive editor of the Staten Island Advance.