

# What They Saw



## AS SEEN THROUGH THESE EYES

*Menemsha Films*

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WHILE FILMMAKERS have been confronting the Holocaust since the French documentary *Night and Fog* (1955) offered one of the first glimpses behind the barbed wire, no film to date has explored the ter-

ritory that writer-director Hilary Helstein ventures into in *As Seen Through These Eyes*, about the painting, drawing and music that camp prisoners created during their horrific ordeal.

Featuring interviews with a dozen survivors, including the late Simon Wiesenthal, Helstein's film connects Adolf Hitler's failure as an artist—he was twice rejected from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna—to his aggressive move to confiscate paintings, close museum doors and burn books. Voice-over narration from poet Maya Angelou puts a fine point on the notion: “His paints were propaganda speeches. With Hitler's rise to power, he transformed his obsession with art toward the creation of destruction.”

But for all of Hitler's attempts to suppress creativity while systematically murdering 11 million people, imagination found a way to thrive in the darkness of the camps. Using makeshift art supplies such as scraps of paper and cement sacks, imprisoned citizens conveyed their experiences through dramatic imagery that had to be secreted away from the prying eyes of Nazi guards. The very voices Hitler believed he was silencing were finding new ways to be heard. In fact, Helstein's film provides unusually uplifting portraits of victims whose unimaginable circumstances led them to discover their talents.

With an engaging visual style and a polished presentation, Helstein shows camp-created works that range from emotionally charged sketches to dramatic paintings in the German Expressionist style. The one thing the images have in common is that they gave each artist a sense of control in a nearly hopeless situation, as Helstein's subjects reveal in the film.

One prisoner, Alfred Kantor, lived through the camps but never spoke with his family about what happened to him there. However, rather than blocking out the memories, he meticulously painted in a diary, purging his thoughts and documenting the evidence.

Famed Nazi hunter Wiesenthal, who died in 2005, reveals for the first time his drive to create a visual record of the Holocaust, presenting the pencil drawings he created in the camp in Helstein's film. Wiesenthal also tells of how his graphic ability enabled him to receive a half-bowl more of soup each day in exchange for drawing for an officer. But the high-contrast creations he drew for himself—one of which depicts Hitler removing his face to uncover a threatening skull—were hidden. “If they had found them? Oh, immediately they'd have killed me,” he explains.

In 1941, 13-year-old Yehuda Bacon was interned in Terezin, billed as a “model camp” and designed to show the world that Hitler was treating the Jews well. Bacon says art and education offered something of a shelter for the younger prisoners, even though events taking place outside of their clandestine classrooms didn't go unnoticed. (A heartbreaking pencil drawing called *Execution of a Jew* depicts a man hanging from a rope, with a guard tightening the noose. The artist is identified as Josef Novak, age 11.)

According to Terezin survivor Ela Weissberger, Terezin teacher and Bauhaus-trained artist Friedl Dicker-Brandeis became a great influence on the kids after she brought her brand of enthusiasm to Terezin. “She would only talk about beautiful things,” Weissberger says. “It made us feel like we were in a different world.”

Although Dicker-Brandeis, who had studied under Paul Klee, was transported to Auschwitz and killed in Birkenau in 1944, she left two suitcases containing more than 4,000 drawings from her students in Terezin that eventually found their way to the Jewish Museum in Prague after the war.

For this poignant celluloid achievement, Helstein spent 10 years tracking down artists and collecting stories, ultimately proving that art can offer release to the confined and freedom to the oppressed.

—CHRISTY GROSZ

From top: Samuel Bak, *Self Portrait*; Alfred Kantor, *The Hell of Auschwitz, 1944*.