

Songs of hope in times of despair

Preserving history inspires a young filmmaker. By Henrietta Cook



The hairs on Rohan Spong's arms stood on end when he met Greg Smith at a party last year and heard about the composer's latest project: a musical reworking of songs from Vilna Ghetto in Lithuania.

"I had a million questions which Greg couldn't answer and said someone should make a documentary on this," Spong recalls.

"Then I realised I was the only person in the room who was a documentary maker."

The filmmaker decided to take on the mammoth and sensitive task of tracking down Jewish survivors who had experienced and created the evocative music of the Vilna Ghetto and his documentary *The Songs They Sang* was born.

After months of detective work the 28-year-old had tracked down his interview subjects. They all lived in different parts of the world, many had changed their names and a large number had never given testimonies about their experiences.

"I wanted to record these survivors' stories before they died," he says.

"The music provides an eyewitness account of survival during this horrible time. There are stories of saving children by giving them to someone, songs about questioning faith, songs about hatred towards the oppressors, and songs about the future."

During the darkest days of World War II the

songs were performed in a theatre in Vilna Ghetto and quickly became popular, with many Jewish inmates humming the tunes of hope and despair on the streets of the Lithuanian town.

"The survivors remember how important the theatre was, for two hours or so they didn't have to think about the outside world," Smith says.

On the morning of Spong's flight to Israel to interview Vilna Ghetto composer Avrom Sutzkever he received a phone call from the musician's family announcing his death.

"He passed away at five in the morning and I was supposed to fly out at eight, but his family asked me to come over and attend his funeral. He became an important part of the documentary and I interviewed his granddaughter who was 33 and discovering all the things he had written during his life."

Sutzkever and fellow former inmate Shmerke Kaczerginski worked in the ghetto collecting pivotal Jewish books from libraries which the Germans wanted to place in a museum dedicated to the "Forgotten Jewish Person". The duo were pivotal in preserving compositions from the ghetto and allegedly hid sheets of music in a cellar which they returned to collect at the end of the war.

The documentary took the young director to the suburbs of his hometown, Melbourne, as well as Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Rome, Paris, New York City and of course, the desolate landscape of Vilna, Lithuania where he found himself knee-deep in snow battling minus 19 degree temperatures with 30 kilograms of camera equipment.

Here he interviewed a survivor who had witnessed her entire family being shot in the forest.

Spong, who was interviewed by MW last year about his film *T is for Teacher*, which explored the experience of transgendered teachers in the US school system, says he is looking forward to the premiere of his film at Bayside Film Festival next month.

He also hopes the documentary makes a name for itself overseas on the festival circuit.

"It's a fascinating and inspiring story, and documents the tenacity of the human experience," he says. ■

The Songs They Sang will premiere at Palace Brighton Bay, 294 Bay Street, Brighton, as part of the Bayside Film Festival on July 14 at 7.15pm. For bookings and more information, call 9596 3590. MW is a proud sponsor of the festival.