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Film records memories of Holocaust

By ALEXA ROZZI

For as long as Hamilton resident Steve Besserman can remember, he's been hearing the stories behind the five numbers tattooed on his parents' arms.

His mother Aranka, especially, talked openly to his sister and him about her experience growing up as a Jewish girl in Hungary during the Holocaust.

Thirty-five years ago, Besserman asked his mother to write down her journey through the concentration camps, recognizing the importance of sharing these memories with generations to come. He knew it would be an emotionally draining task and never expected her to present three spiral notebooks to him six weeks later, filled with her story of survival.

Five years ago, from the pages of his mother's compilation of memories, Besserman's first indie-
See **FILM**, Page 6



Gerardo Puglia and Hamilton resident Steve Besserman stand in Atkar while filming "Only a Number." (Photo courtesy of Steve Besserman.)

FILM continued from Page 1

pendent documentary project was born. Around the same time, Aranka was diagnosed with dementia, a disease that would later eat away at the very memories she so vividly captured on paper for her son.

Titled "Only a Number," the 64-minute documentary tells of the struggle to survive but also the struggle to remember. On April 3, the film will be shared with the masses at the Garden State Film Festival.

Written in what he calls "Hunglish," his mother's Hungarian accent in written form, Besserman was intent to tell the story through his mother's own words. He transcribed his mother's narrative into a manuscript and reached out to his father, aunts and uncles to fill in gaps in his mother's story, but was intent to keep his mother's voice intact.

Besserman said that written somewhere in his mother's diary, amongst the descriptions of the brutal beatings, starvation and physical labor endured, Aranka included one sentence that served as the inspiration to share this personal story with the masses.

"Written in my mother's handwriting were the words, 'Sometimes I think I survived just so I can tell about it.'"

A "second-generation survivor," Besserman said memorializing his parent's experiences became an obligation.

"In 10 years, there will be no more survivors," Besserman said. "There is a moral responsibility as second-generation survivors to keep memories going."

Now, years after his mother first wrote down her memories and after a year and half of production, "Only a Number" was selected for the documentary feature category for the Garden State Film Festival.

Besserman said the world premier of the film gives him a chance to share the documentary with a wider audience.

Months of planning went into the production of "Only a Number." Besserman arranged teams of translators, location managers and production assistants to help capture footage of landscapes, artifacts and the visual metaphors still present throughout Europe. Besserman's background with CBS Television aided in the creation of the film, helping to establish contacts and acquire equipment. He and long time friend and director of Photography Gerardo Puglia left for Europe in April 2010 and began retracing his parent's footsteps. Using his mother's diary as a guide, the two started in the villages where Besserman's parents grew up, followed the memoir through ghettos and the concentration camps, up to the moment they were free from Nazi control.

During an 18-day span, their travels took them through North Poland, Hungary, South Poland and Germany.

Besserman said the experience was a mix of horror and wonder.

He passed the crematorium at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the deadliest of the death camps. He walked along the barbed wire fences and by the barracks and latrines.

"Seeing the things my mom described so vividly was overpowering and emotional," Besserman said. "The words she wrote down on paper rolled around in my head."

Besserman said the experience was also a positive one and catches a number of personal incidences on camera. Standing on the property of his mother's family home in Hungary on May 1, 2010, his mother's 86th birthday, Puglia filmed Besserman singing happy birthday. Besserman also wished his mother and wife a happy Mother's Day at

Waldlager, the concentration camp where Aranka and her husband, Josef met.

Upon the film's completion, Besserman and Puglia returned home to piece two-and-a-half week's worth of film together. A crew made up of close friends like composer Allen Krantz, editor Ivan Drufovka and co-producers Cyndi Haas and wife Resa were a part of the post-production process.

"Our small, independent crew was able to create a powerful and beautiful film," Besserman said.

Besserman's first priority was to show the film to his parents. Aranka's dementia had worsened and although she reacted in the moment to film, minutes later she did not remember watching the documentary of her

journey.

Besserman said he considers the film his own journey of rediscovery, guided by his mother's narrative to recapture the occurrences of the Holocaust that are being buried by time. He said his mother's memories represent what lies beneath the surface of the locations he visited.

"The gates, the factories, the ghettos – they are all intact," Besserman said. "There are still many remnants of the past visible in the present that time can change, but never truly erase."

"Only a Number" will be screened in the Axelrod Performing Arts Center in Deal between 12:15 p.m. and 2:15 p.m. on April 3. The festival is open to the public.