



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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South Florida's PBS Station WLRN Channel 17 invites local community to attend the film premiere of "Treblinka's Last Witness"

WLRN's latest film gives a first-hand account by last-known survivor Samuel Willenberg, now 92 years old, about his life during the Holocaust and as a Jewish inmate of the Treblinka death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland. The premiere screening takes place at Olympia Theater at Gusman Center on Tuesday, October 21st starting at 6 p.m.

Miami, FL – October 7, 2014 – Samuel Willenberg, now 92 years old, is the last living survivor of the Treblinka death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland where an estimated 900,000 Jews were murdered in a period of just 13 months at the height of World War II. Still haunted 70 years later by the horrors he witnessed as a young forced laborer, Samuel has immortalized the Treblinka story in a series of bronze sculptures of the tragic victims who dwell indelibly in his memory like ghosts.

The sculptures, together with archival footage and photographs from the period, illustrate Samuel's riveting narrative, telling a singularly powerful and personal story of the annihilation of Polish Jewry in the death camps built by the Germans to carry out Hitler's infamous Final Solution.

As a prisoner at Treblinka, Samuel witnessed the death in the gas chambers of his two beloved sisters, Itta and Tamara, among countless others. In his sculptures, the most poignant of these individual tragedies are brought back vividly to life. Like Polansky's "The Pianist", the film focuses on one man's personal odyssey to reflect the enormity of the genocide inflicted upon Poland's 3.5 million Jews, at the time the world's largest Jewish community, seven times greater than the Jewish population of pre-war Germany.

The story begins in Czestochowa, Poland, where Samuel grew up as the son of an eminent Jewish painter. When the Germans marched into Poland in 1939, the family went into hiding, but when Samuel's sisters were arrested by the Gestapo in 1942 he fled to nearby Opatow where he was rounded up along with the town's entire Jewish population of 6,000 people and herded aboard a cattle train bound for Treblinka.

The Nazi death camps were very different from the work camps, like Auschwitz and Dachau. They were, in the words of holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer, "factories whose end product was dead Jews, a first in human history where people were exterminated on an industrial basis". At Treblinka the devastation was complete.

Within hours of the train's arrival, all 6,000 of Samuel's fellow deportees were dead. By a stroke of unimaginable luck, Samuel was recognized by a member of the small Jewish work crew at the camp and selected to join the labor force. "It took me several days to realize where I was," he says. "I was in hell."

The sculptures tell the stories from the rest of his time at Treblinka. There is the disabled Jewish veteran of World War One whose German medals of valor could not save him; the mad girl from Warsaw who arrived at the camp in a ball gown and high-heeled shoes; a 19-year-old student named Ruth Dorfman whose flowing head of beautiful hair Samuel is forced to harvest for the Nazi war effort; the synagogue cantor reduced to overseeing the camp latrines; and the trio of Jewish violinists pressed by the SS guards to accompany the slaughter with classical music.

The largest of these sculptures depicts the prisoner revolt at Treblinka in August 1943 as the Germans, the tide of war turning against them, set about eradicating all evidence of their crimes by destroying the death camps. Samuel was one of about 100 inmates who escaped amid a fierce firefight. By the war's end only 67 remained alive. The others have all since died in the intervening decades, leaving Samuel as the last witness.

After his escape, he made his way to Warsaw where he took part in the ill-fated Polish Uprising of 1944. Once again, he somehow managed to escape when the Polish resistance collapsed amid some of the bloodiest street fighting of the war.

Samuel's story is one of survival against staggering odds and, though heart-rending and horrifying, it is ultimately one of triumph. At the end of the war, he met Ada, a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto whose mother perished at Treblinka. The couple married and went on to rebuild their lives in Israel where they reside today. Their daughter Orit is a successful architect and in the film the family visits Berlin to see the new Israeli Embassy which she designed on land once occupied by Hitler's Third Reich. Orit has also designed a museum for the Treblinka memorial site and Samuel's dream is to see it built with his sculptures on permanent display there before he dies.

Told without dramatization, "Treblinka's Last Witness" is an unvarnished tale of extraordinary intensity, a true page-turner carried along on its own raw power.

For John LaBonia, General Manager of WLRN, it has been a personal journey to see this film through to its completion. In 2010, LaBonia visited the Florida Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg and came upon an exhibit displaying a boxcar resting on the original tracks from the Treblinka camp. "A volunteer at the museum approached me and mentioned they had found a little girl's gold ring wedged in the boxcar's floorboards," said John LaBonia. "It was at this moment, looking at the Treblinka boxcar and thinking about this little girl and her ring that drew me to do the research. I knew that what took place at this death camp needed to be told, there is no doubt that Samuel's story will resonate with our viewers here in South Florida."

Says WLRN producer/director Alan Tomlinson: "Rarely, once in a lifetime if one is lucky, does a documentary filmmaker find a subject whose story is so vivid and whose manner of telling it so full of passion and unveiled emotion. To travel with Samuel on this astonishing journey is not simply to hear again about the horrors of the holocaust, but to experience them with him, as though it were all happening in one's very presence."

Treblinka's Last Witness will premiere Tuesday, October 28th at 8 p.m. on WLRN Channel 17.

Production Sponsor:

Major production funding for *Treblinka's Last Witness* is provided by the Estate of Mildred Pallas Levenson.

CALENDAR LISTING

WLRN Channel 17 presents

TREBLINKA'S LAST WITNESS, a new documentary from WLRN gives a first-hand account by last-known survivor Samuel Willenberg, now 92 years old, about his life during the Holocaust and as a Jewish inmate of the Treblinka death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Airing on Channel 17:

October 28th 8 p.m. PREMIERE

November 2nd 10 p.m.

November 6th 8 p.m.

Join WLRN for this complimentary screening at the Olympia Theater at Gusman Center which will start promptly at 6:00 p.m., followed by a film discussion at 7:30 p.m. which will be moderated by world-renowned Holocaust expert Dr. Michael Berenbaum. The World Premiere Film Screening of *Treblinka's Last Witness* is made possible with the support of the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs and the Cultural Affairs Council, the Miami-Dade County Mayor and Board of County Commissioners.

Tuesday, October 21, 2014

5:00 Doors Open

6:00 Film Presentation

7:30 Film Discussion with Holocaust Expert Dr. Michael Berenbaum.

Olympia Theater at Gusman Center

174 E. Flagler Street

Miami, FL. 33131

Seating is limited. Please RSVP at tickets.gusmancenter.org

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About WLRN-TV

WLRN-TV Channel 17 is a PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) member station licensed to the School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida. During an average month, Channel 17 reaches over 600,000 TV households in the Miami - Ft. Lauderdale area with a viewing audience in four South Florida counties, from Palm Beach to Key West. WLRN is South Florida's leading PBS Ready to Learn station airing thirteen hours of award-winning children's programming daily. WLRN-TV also presents the best of the PBS nationally recognized series to compliment locally produced content. Our prime time schedule features an eclectic array of arts, science, history and WLRN original documentary specials to address the diverse interests of the South Florida community. www.wlrn.org