

The Songs They Sang

Australia, 2011, 94 mins, Doco, 16x9, (Not rated)
Directed by Rohan Spong.

IMDb -
FVFS panel 3.5 stars (out of 5)



The documentary is an Australian independent production of 94 minutes. It was filmed in five countries by director Rohan Spong including Israel, France, Lithuania and America. *The Songs They Sang* was produced by Anna Monea and Amadeo Marquez-Perez.

The Songs They Sang contains songs written in the Vilna Ghetto, Lithuania during the Holocaust, many of which were later arranged/recomposed by Australian composer Joseph Giovinazzo and released in a CD.

The Songs They Sang is the true story of the performances, which took place inside the Vilna ghetto, Lithuania, during World War II. These performances brought hope to the Jewish people during the horror of the Holocaust.

The film centers on Avrom Sutzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski, who wrote startling and poetic accounts of Vilna, some of which were set to music and performed in the ghetto. Survivors recall these songs and how the performances provided critical hours of “forgetfulness.”

Survivors provide eyewitness accounts of the events on June 1941 when the German soldiers first invaded Vilna and terror engulfed its citizens. Within days the persecutions began and from an estimated Jewish population of 80,000 about 35,000 were murdered in the Ponar Forest nearby. Those remaining were forced into what became known as the Vilna ghetto.

During the nearly two years of its existence, starvation, disease, mass executions at Ponar and deportations to concentration camps reduced the ghetto’s population from an estimated 40,000 people to a few hundred. The documentary also considers the various people preserving the musical legacies: A young Jewish community leader who struggles to retain the culture and history of his forebears in Lithuania today and a number of people who have a connection to these evocative songs.

Review by Ian Davidson.

While the songs of the ghetto were apparently written to boost the morale and used as a “tool for survival” I found the songs very sad, full of lament, talking of prison and chains etc – all doom, gloom and darkness. It was only in the last 20 minutes of the film, when we heard the re-orchestrated and professionally recorded songs that I felt moved by them. Only then did they tell me of a people who wish to love, dream and survive.

The search for the remaining survivors from the ghetto was well constructed, led by a descendant of the main songwriter. Interviews with these people revealed more of their stories and the background to the songs. The music score left me in no doubt as to when I should be horrified by their tales.

It is a pity we didn't hear the beautiful reconstructed songs earlier in the film as they could have been an ideal companion to the stories as they unfolded.



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inc A0028942B

ABN:62 373 979

www.fvfs.org.au

admin@fvfs.org.au

03 9873 1369