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Inspiration for ‘Light’ ballet recalls tale of survival

by Toby Tabachnick

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(Editor’s note: This is the latest in a continuing series of stories about the Holocaust ballet, “Light,” which opens on Nov. 12 at the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre.)

“Light/The Holocaust & Humanity Project,” the centerpiece of Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre’s 40th anniversary season, is divided into three parts, just as survivor Naomi Warren sees her own life: before the war, during the war and after the war.

“Light,” which premiered in Austin in 2005, was created by Stephen Mills, artistic director of Ballet Austin, and was inspired by Warren’s life. The PBT will perform it in Pittsburgh from Nov. 12 to 15, following a wide range of community events designed to promote dialogue about the Holocaust.

The ballet uses dance to recreate Warren’s personal journey through imprisonment, marginalization, discrimination and, ultimately, liberation.

“Before the war, my life was wonderful,” said Warren, 89, speaking from her home in Houston, Texas. She was born into a prominent family in eastern Poland in 1920, and lived the life “of a youngster who was very, very privileged.”

Until the 1930s, Warren enjoyed a life of prosperity: good schools, lots of friends, piano lessons and tennis.

“Then, I never knew about the tragedies that could affect my life,” she said.

Things changed on Sept. 1, 1939 — Warren’s 19th birthday — when German troops crossed the Polish border.

Warren, who had been in Warsaw getting her papers to study at a university in England, returned home to find her town under Soviet occupation. Her father, the president of a bank, was sent to Siberia on charges of capitalism.

Warren went to a Russian teacher's college, and met and married a doctor. But in 1941, Germany occupied her region of Poland, turning her life upside down.

“They started putting us in ghettos and various camps,” she said. “I was sent to an internment camp with my mother and husband and other relatives. From there I was sent to Auschwitz.”

Her mother and husband perished in the camps.

“I don't have to tell you about my life in Auschwitz,” Warren said. “The fear and the not knowing what is going to happen the next day. The beatings. But somehow I endured it.”

In January 1945, SS Chief Heinrich Himmler issued an order to destroy Auschwitz so the world would not see its atrocities. Since so little time remained before the Russians arrived, though, the gates were opened, and “they told us to march,” Warren recalled. The prisoners were sent by cattle car to another camp, not far from Berlin.

“It was a very, very bad place to be,” Warren said. “There were a lot of bad medical experiments being performed on the women there. Luckily, they were looking for prisoners to go to another camp.” She found herself on a train to Bergen-Belsen, where she remained until April 15, 1945 — the day British army liberated the camp.

“My fight for survival was so strong,” she said. “I had to figure out how to live and what to do.”

While still in Auschwitz, Warren formed strong friendships with five girls with whom she shared a single bunk. Those relationships helped her survive.

“We became a support system for each other,” she recalled. “Each day we would share our experiences. The most important thing was to live with hope, despite everything. We had to hope there was sunshine or something better in the future. And this is what actually happened.”

Warren came to the United States after the war, where she had a sister and an uncle who left Europe before the War.

“I came on March 15, 1946, on the, Liberty ship,” Warren said. “I cannot tell you how it felt to see the skyline of New York and the Statue of Liberty. It is very, very hard to describe it.”

Warren went to business school in New York, married and had three children. She and her husband established a successful meat import company. After her husband died in 1960, Warren ran the company on her own, until she sold it in 1997.

“I've had an incredible life and an incredible journey,” she said, “despite the fact that I survived three concentration camps and the feel of the German boot. Despite everything, I think I came out a pretty normal person.”

She sees her experiences as life lessons.

“The life I faced taught me how to fight for survival,” Warren said, “and it made me strong.”

Seeing “Light” performed for the first time, actually watching her life depicted in dance, was an emotional experience for her.

“I could see my life. I don’t know how many people felt it was my life, but I knew it was my life,” Warren said. “Every Holocaust survivor watching it could feel the drama and the happiness when they were liberated.”

An active participant in Houston Jewish life, Warren is involved with the Anti-Defamation League, the local Jewish Federation and the Holocaust Museum Houston.

In honor of her 80th birthday, her children established the Warren Fellowship for Future Teachers at Holocaust Museum Houston, a weeklong immersion program for education students, teaching them how to teach the Shoa. In fact, Warren first met choreographer Mills when he became a Warren fellow prior to creating “Light.”

At the urging of her children, Warren returned to Auschwitz in 2003 along with 14 family members.

“All the way from Krakow to Auschwitz, I cried. I didn’t know how many memories it would bring back to me,” she said.

“But as we were approaching the gate, some incredible strength came to me. Instead of crying, I became very strong. I looked out at my whole family; my children, their spouses, my nieces and nephews, and I felt how lucky I am. I came here to be a victim, but I became a survivor. I was victorious. I won the war.”

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