

New film *Forget Us Not* reminds of other groups targeted in Holocaust

By Adam Brinklow

Documentarian Heather E. Connell, director of 2009's *Small Voices*, got an even bigger shock than she expected when she toured the infamous Nazi death camp Dachau twenty years ago: she had never before realized that the pink triangle, once used as an early symbol of the gay rights movement, was actually a symbol used by the Nazis to identify gay men in concentration camps. Connell had particular reason to be alarmed: she has a pink triangle tattoo. "I was embarrassed by my lack of education," she says.

That was the first seed of Connell's new film *Forget Us Not*, a documentary about the non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust, featuring archival photos, interviews with the (now very, very elderly) survivors, and narration by "Sons of Anarchy" star Ron Perlman. There's certainly no shortage of Holocaust documentaries already, but people may be surprised by what they can learn from Connell's:



Theresa Kennedy

There were more non-Jewish prisoners than you probably think: "There were not many people from each group, but collectively they make up five million victims. A lot of those stories haven't been told because those people belonged to groups that are still marginalized today."

Gays in the camps might have had it worse than anyone else: "Gay men had no resources in the camps. They were afraid to tell anyone they were gay for fear that they'd be singled out for extra abuse, sometimes even from the other prisoners. It was impossible to form any social group for protection, because you didn't want anyone to know; stigma, fear, and hatred followed them even there."

No gay women were sentenced to the camps: "The pink triangle was for gay men. Women were not singled out the same way. Hitler seemed to have a very passionate hatred for gay men in particular, and we can only guess why. Maybe two men showing public affection for each other just stood out more in those days, and Hitler's way of dealing with anything he found threatening was to eliminate it."

Religious were persecuted too: "Jehovah's witnesses were targeted for the camps. They were committed to non-violence, so they refused to join the military and fall into line like most people, and they saw the heil salute as elevating Hitler above God, so they wouldn't do that either. Hitler had been moving to outlaw the religion, because he felt threatened by it. And of course, some Catholic priests and protestant ministers were in the camps because they couldn't stay quiet about the round-ups. Anyone who didn't toe the line ended up in the camps."

Even escaping the camps wasn't the end of it: "Gay men who lived through the camps didn't dare tell anyone why they'd been in because they could have been put right back in prison. After the camps were liberated no wanted to take the Roma or the Sinti [commonly known as "gypsies," though many find the term offensive], so they ended up on the streets. When I went to Berlin there was a memorial up to every single group except the Roma. I asked a curator why and all he could say was, 'They've certainly gotten the short end of the stick, historically.'"

You may not ever have heard some of the most upsetting details: "I saw the official photos of the camps, photo ops for the Red Cross of cleaned-up prisoners in nice uniforms, smiling over big plates of food. Seeing those photos and knowing that it was all a lie was one of the hardest things to deal with. I'd finish at the archives, pour a beer, and say to myself, 'I just can't believe it.'"