

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR JEWISH FILM: THE ALBUM OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Sharon Rivo

Tucked in the basement of the Lown Judaic Center at Brandeis University, a small cadre of dedicated people oversee a treasure trove from the last century of moving images of Jewish life in the Diaspora. The materials—film, video, and still photographs—have been ingathered from the four corners of the earth.

The phone rings constantly and e-mail messages to jewishfilm@brandeis.edu bring inquiries from professors, researchers, curators, programmers and the public. “Do you have any images of Mendel Beilis?” asks Yohanan Petrovsky-Stern who is teaching history at Northwestern University. “What film would you recommend to provide an overview of the Holocaust for an introductory course on World War II?” A researcher from Germany calls to ask if there is any film of Herschel Grynspan for a new documentary. The Fritz Bauer Institute in Frankfurt, Germany, requests all the films of Paul Falkenberg be transferred to video and sent for a research

project about this German émigré filmmaker. Yiddiskayt LA calls to book *The Dybbuk*, the classic 1937 Yiddish feature film about star-crossed lovers, for an event at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery to



Tevye, USA, 1939 starring Maurice Schwartz
The first non-English language film to be included in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress. (Courtesy of the NCJF)

attract young people to glimpse the world of Yiddish culture.

The National Center for Jewish Film is an independent and non-profit institution.

Created twenty-seven years ago at the invitation of President Marver Bernstein and the founding President Dr. Abram Sachar with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to assist the preservation of six Yiddish films, the Center has become the largest archive of Jewish content film and video material in the world outside the state of Israel. With over 12,000 reels of film—dating from 1903 to 2003—it houses a multifaceted collection of Jewish images. Initially best known for the collection of Yiddish films acquired in 1976—the Rutenberg and Everett Yiddish film library—the Center quickly added key collections from The Joint Distribution Committee, ORT, United Jewish Appeal, the Omaha Bureau of Jewish Education, NY Federation, dozens of national and regional Jewish organizations, and collections of filmmakers Paul Falkenberg, Arthur Zegart, Bernard Timberg, and Lazar Dunnar.

The films provide a glimpse into the diverse worlds of a people dispersed around the globe. Some of the most important images are simple scenes of daily

life in far off places such as the robust soccer players and cyclists in Novogradok, Poland (1930); Roman Vishniac’s images of ultrareligious farmers in the Carpathian Mountains (1936); Cantor Yossee Rosenblatt in Palestine (1934); color home movies taken by Bill Bernstein aboard the ship Exodus in 1945 (before he was killed by the British); a speech by President Harry Truman on February 16, 1957, at an Israel Bonds dinner honoring Eddie Cantor; barefoot children playing in Berdichev Russia in 1925; the only known film performance of the famous Yiddish actress Esther Rokhl Kaminska; chicken farmers in New Jersey in 1930s; merchants in the

Kasbah in Morocco; wealthy Berlin Jews in their gardens in 1933; street peddlers on the Lower East Side of New York in 1903; Nazi propaganda film from Theresienstadt; Jewish orphans in France in 1945; and

guests playing tennis at Grossinger's Catskill resort in the 1920s.

Due to the limited space, the Center cannot accommodate researchers, educators, and filmmakers on site; instead users

provide a detailed list of their requests and time-coded video cassettes are sent. To date only about 25 percent of the collection has been transferred to tape.

Mimi Krant, the cofounder in charge of the distribution of more than 250 titles, works with researchers, educators, and programmers from Hong Kong to Fairbanks, Alaska. Richard Pontius, the technical director, has supervised the restoration of dozens of Yiddish feature films and archival projects. He also runs the "stock footage" library, which provides film to museum installations, and new documentary film productions.

John Quackenbush, the director of the Center's Web site (www.jewishfilm.org), oversees the cataloging and manages publicity for the annual Spring Jewish Film Festival held on the Brandeis University campus. Sharon Pucker Rivo, the cofounder and executive director, is

involved in acquiring new collections. For the past twelve years, she has developed and taught courses on "Film and the

Holocaust" and "Jews on Screen" at Brandeis and other institutions.

One of the most rewarding activities is helping 108 independent filmmakers find markets for their films. The Center carefully selects historically accurate films to augment courses and provide resources for Jewish educators and programmers. Some of the center's new titles include *The Power of Good*, an award-winning Czech documentary about Nicholas Winton, a man who saved 669 children in 1939;



Power of Good, Czechoslovakia, 2002
Nicholas Winton

The film documents Winton's rescue of 669 children in 1939.
(Courtesy of the NCJF)

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Love Inventory, an award-winning Israeli documentary about family; *Back to Gombin*, a documentary about the return to a Polish village by survivors and their families where a new generation find avenues of reconciliation with

young Poles; and *Rutenberg*, an Israeli feature film about the difficulties of the early *yishuv*. The Web site provides complete details of over 250 titles available for rental or purchase. The playdate calendar lists films which are being screened at venues worldwide and provides links to those institutions.

The Center's collection has become increasingly valuable as visual images have become the predominant language of the twenty-first century. The Center is committed to preserving these visual records on film in order guarantee future generations access to this movie album of the Jewish people.

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