

City Front: Documenting the human spirit

Lisa Samin , THE JERUSALEM POST

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At the recent world premiere of her documentary film *Refusenik* at the Jerusalem Cinematheque, Laura Bialis stood on stage after the screening surrounded by the "stars" of her movie - Jewish activists from both sides of the Iron Curtain who started a grassroots movement 40 years ago that eventually led to the fall of the Soviet Union.

Bialis was overwhelmed by emotion as the audience rose to its feet in a resounding standing ovation. *Refusenik* was the culmination of five years of work for the 34-year-old award-winning producer.

Around her stood Natan Sharansky, Yosef Begun, Volodya and Masha Slepak, who collectively spent almost three decades in Soviet prisons and labor camps for the right to immigrate to Israel.

"This movie changed my life," says Bialis. "I was deeply affected by these people who stood up for who they are and what they believed in, and changed the course of history."

Bialis grew up in Los Angeles, where an Israeli Hebrew school teacher she had at the Stephen S. Wise Temple made Israel come alive. This and her trip to Israel with her parents at age 10 engendered a sense of connection to her Jewish identity that had lain dormant during her formative years.

"I saw an excavation of a tel at the Western Wall," says Laura with her trademark enthusiasm during an interview at a Jerusalem café. "And I was amazed that I was part of this people with such a long history that was so physical and spiritual."

While at Stanford University, Bialis was immersed in post-war communism and kept a picture from the local newspaper of then-Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev and former US secretary of state George Shultz posing at Stanford in 1992. Little did she know that 12 years later she would be interviewing Gorbachev for her groundbreaking film.

After completing a bachelor's degree in history, Bialis attended the University of Southern California School of Cinema-Television. Although she had no previous film experience, it was there that Bialis "found her art."

For one of her assignments, Bialis produced a short film on a special-needs child who despite his handicaps - blindness, bone cancer and having only one leg - took part in myriad activities.

"I fell in love with this child," says Bialis. "Not for his weakness, but for his strength. I wanted to show people who he was through my eyes. I wanted people to know him."

To achieve this goal, Bialis only revealed the extent of the boy's handicaps after showing the scope of his physical achievements.

"I was so frightened to show this film to the class," recalls Bialis. "But after it was over, my classmates were crying. I could not believe the impact I had. It was incredible. I felt like I could really make a difference through my art."

During summer vacation, Bialis and two friends from film school wanted to make a documentary. Her father suggested that they feature a local Holocaust survivor who was an ardent civil rights activist. With one of the first digital video cameras and a below-shoestring budget, the three friends produced the award-winning *TAK FOR ALT - Survival of a Human Spirit*.

"To make a good documentary film you have to live the story of the people, and you have to love the people you work with," says Bialis.

The three traveled to Eastern Europe with the film's star Judy Meisel. They traced Meisel's war-time journey as a young woman from the Kovno Ghetto through the Stutthof concentration camp, and ultimately to Denmark, where she was liberated and restored to health by locals.

"We had no real experience and no money when we came home," recalls Bialis. "But we took outstanding footage and we knew that we had to make this film. It symbolized hope over tragedy, and the triumph of the human spirit. This is a recurrent theme in our Jewish history."

At the first screening a few educators saw the movie and loved it. From there, growing interest landed it a screening on PBS, and later it was honored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as "one of the outstanding films of 1999" and included in their prestigious Contemporary Documentary Screening Series. The film is still being used by teachers in over 30 states, and has become part of the history curriculum in many school districts.

The idea for the refusenik movie arose during a screening of *TAK FOR ALT* in Omaha, where local Anti-Defamation League head Bob Wolfson insisted that Bialis meet Shirley Goldstein, who played a major role in the Soviet Jewry freedom movement.

At first Bialis, exhausted from the endless fundraising for *TAK FOR ALT*, was lackluster about the invitation, but when she met Goldstein and heard her activist stories, Bialis was hooked.

"I have so many stories to tell about filming this documentary," says Bialis. "The enormity of what these people did was overwhelming. I knew that I had to do justice to their story."

Over the next five years, the movie took on a life of its own. Bialis worked diligently to raise funds and established the Foundation for Documentary Projects, landing a \$100,000 donation from a philanthropist who was moved by Sharansky's book *Fear No Evil*.

She and her team then traveled to Russia where they sat for months with a translator reviewing material from the state archives. They also visited the Soviet prisons and labor camps where the refuseniks were tortured and denied the right to emigrate to Israel, and interviewed Gorbachev.

"Throughout the hours of dramatic interviews with the refuseniks, I constantly wondered what I would have done in their situation. Would I have given up everything I had and suffered so terribly to come to Israel and to live freely as a Jew? I don't know. But it's important to take a stand on things and to have personal integrity in our day-to-day lives," says Bialis.

A big break came when a friend helped Bialis arrange a meeting with the CEO of Universal Studios, who agreed to donate rare footage.

Although Bialis is still raising money to cover the film's \$1 million price tag, she is satisfied with the result and says she even has enough good footage to make a sequel.

"The opening was a once-in-a-lifetime experience," says Bialis of the film's premiere at the Jerusalem Jewish Film Festival. "It was unbelievable to bring so many of the refuseniks and activists together in Jerusalem 30 years later.

"I want every Jewish child and teenager in the US, the former Soviet Union and Israel to see this film," she adds. "I want them to understand that living freely as a Jew and having the right to live in Israel is not something to take for granted, that a few people who take a stand can make a difference that resonates throughout the world."

Bialis is now working to promote the film commercially and as an educational tool. She also wants to start a foundation in the US to raise money for refuseniks who came to Israel and are struggling financially.

In the meantime, Bialis is filming her next documentary on musicians in Sderot.

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