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Rebel With a Cause

by Simona Fuma

It was a late Friday night in February. Filmmaker Laura Bialis and a friend, both pleasantly tired and full of food and conversation, were returning home from a Shabbat dinner in the southern Israeli border town of Sderot when they heard the click of a loudspeaker and a woman's voice announcing, "Tzeva Adom, Tzeva Adom (Color Red, Color Red)." Though they knew the routine, the alarm never failed to send a rush of adrenaline coursing through them. Both began to sprint, knowing that in 15 seconds a Kassam rocket would fall nearby, with the ability to kill or injure anyone caught within 60 feet of impact.

But Bialis and her friend were on an unfamiliar street. They weren't sure where to run.

Without much time to think, they ran to the closest house and banged on the door. No one answered. "That was the time I really felt fear," the gutsy 34-year-old California native told JEWISH FAMILY LIFE a month later over coffee in Sderot. "I could feel my heart pounding."

Today, however, as the sun shines over red-roofed houses near Sderot's city center, the tall, tanned Bialis is calm and at-ease as she recalls the experience that ended with an explosion in the distance and her simply going home to bed. Then, without skipping a beat, she launches into a discussion of the projects that have made her who she is today: an up-and-coming filmmaker who has raised over \$1 million in grants to support award-winning projects that can land her for months on end in far-flung, even war-torn, locales. Like Sderot.

She has been stationed in the beleaguered Israeli border town since December, working on a feature documentary about the trials and triumphs of aspiring young musicians who are navigating their careers amid the 3,000-plus Palestinian-launched rockets that have landed in and around the city since 2001 (killing 11 and wounding 500). Despite the ongoing barrage, which can reach 50 or more rockets a day in times of escalation, the Israeli government has been unable to stop the Gazan rocket launchers over the last seven years and has effectively left the town to fend for itself. This is due, in part, to apathy around the world and in Israel over the plight of Sderot, as well as to international pressure on Israel not to take any retaliatory measures against Gaza.

"What I want to show is that there are amazing, wonderful things that are worth protecting here," Bialis explains. "To show there's a lot of positive things here. And that's what I found through the story of the music."

As a filmmaker, Bialis' style is the opposite of, say, Michael Moore, who tends to knock viewers over the head with his larger-than-life personality and point of view. Instead, Bialis allows her subjects to tell their own story and uses a juxtaposition of characters and scenes to pack an emotional punch. Bialis turned her attention to Sderot after realizing that "there was a deep story here that was worth following" - a story she discovered while flying back and forth between Israel and the U.S. in 2004 to conduct more than 100 interviews for her most recently completed project, *Refusenik*. The two-hour documentary, billed as the most comprehensive portrait of the 30-year struggle to free 3 million Soviet Jews and which cost an estimated \$1 million to make, will be released in art-house theaters in major U.S. cities this month.

"It tells the story of an unbelievable grassroots movement," Bialis says. "I hope to see people taking their families to the film, to remind them of what is possible."

For a city of 20,000, Sderot has a surprisingly vibrant arts scene, with its own art-house movie theater, film and television school, and professional music studio in a bomb-shelter-turned-clubhouse called Sderock. Starting with the North African immigrants who founded this working-class town in the 1950's, Bialis explains, music has always been a huge part of life here. It was the second generation, however, that first realized they could integrate their parents' rhythms into mainstream Israeli rock, and the sound has taken off, with East-West ensembles like TeaPacks and the Idan Reichel Project topping charts in Israel and attracting attention abroad. For Bialis, this is the proud, dynamic Sderot that she wants people to see through her film.

"I've seen a lot of apathy [about Sderot]," Bialis says with a sigh. "I've seen people looking at me like what the hell are you doing there? Like I'm American and I'm too good or something." Born and raised in a Reform Jewish household in Santa Barbara, Bialis went to Hebrew school and attended synagogue regularly with her parents - both of whom worked in the finance sector - and her three younger siblings. It was only when she visited Israel for the first time at age 10, however, that Bialis says she felt a strong sense of Jewish identity.

"I remember we went to the *kotel* and they were excavating next to the Western Wall," she recalls. "We went to the dig site and we talked to the archaeologists and we saw them brushing the stones off, and I remember feeling this feeling that I couldn't believe that I was part of this story. That I was part of this people that survived for so long and that had such an amazing history."

As a teenager, Bialis started to read books on Jewish subjects, including *Exodus*, Leon Uris' novelistic account of the founding of the State of Israel, which left her "transformed and feeling so proud." She graduated from Stanford University in 1995 with a bachelor's degree in history and subsequently earned her master's in film production from the University of Southern California's School of Cinema-Television.

Right after film school, with seed money from her parents and the rest raised in grants, Bialis set out across Europe with Holocaust-survivor-turned-civil-rights activist Judy Meisel. Hoping to make a movie about Meisel's life that a "15-year-old non-Jewish kid in America" could enjoy, Bialis indisputably succeeded. Released in 1999, the hour-long *Tak for Alt*, which she co-directed with two colleagues from film school - Broderick Fox and Sarah Levy - was screened in theaters nationwide, as well as on PBS and Danish television. It was also honored by the Anti-Defamation League and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and nearly a decade later, it is still being used as an educational tool in public schools across the nation.

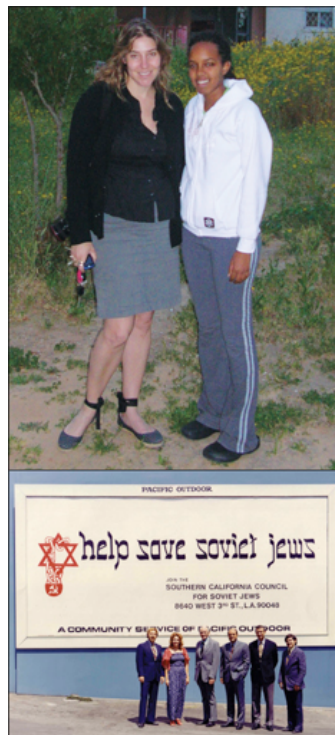
"I saw these kids in Nebraska who had no connection to the *Shoah*," Bialis says. "They learn about it through Judy's story ... They now met a Holocaust survivor. They're not going to become one of those people who said the Holocaust didn't happen."

After *Tak for Alt* came *Refusenik*, which eventually drew Bialis' attention to Sderot. While flying back and forth to Israel to interview former refuseniks, her childhood enthusiasm for the country returned and she began reading the Israeli papers online and also studying Hebrew. Then, in May 2007, she started getting emails from a friend about how there were now 50 Kassams a day raining down on Sderot. Scouring the American papers to see how they reported the situation, Bialis was dismayed by what she found: absolutely nothing.

"Nothing about a humanitarian crisis or that people are fleeing and had nowhere to go," Bialis says incredulously. "I got so angry. But then I realized ... if nobody



Filmmaker Laura Bialis
Photo courtesy of Laura Bialis



else is going to be bringing this story to America and to the rest of the world, then I am going to do it."

So, a determined Bialis found an Israeli USC film student, as well as a member of her Los Angeles Hebrew class who felt as passionately as she did, and a month later, the three found themselves wielding camera equipment through the streets of Sderot.

"I told my parents I was going on vacation for a few weeks," she laughs, adding that she conveniently omitted the details of exactly where she was headed.

That was 10 months ago. And despite that one incident in February and the fact that she is frequently woken from her sleep by Color Red alerts - which means she has to jump out of bed and run to her house's laundry room/bomb shelter - Bialis says she doesn't fear for her safety in her new home, where, outside of filmmaking, she studies Hebrew and cooks for friends. In fact, Bialis recently decided to make aliyah, though she will continue to travel for her films.

"People say to me, 'You're crazy. Why do you want to make aliya?'" she says. "'It's not the dream of early Zionism. There are so many problems here.' And I say, 'Davka - I want to fix the problems. I want to come and contribute.'"

Besides, Bialis adds earnestly, summing up her philosophy as it pertains to life, Israel and her own filmmaking, "It is up to us if we want to make a change."

Simona Fuma is the Israel editor of World Jewish Digest.



TOP: Bialis with Hagit Yaso, 18, one of the subjects of her film and a rising singer on the Sderot music scene. Photo courtesy of Simona Fuma

MIDDLE: A still from Bialis' documentary *Refusenik*, which tells the amazing story of the 30-year struggle to free 3 million Soviet Jews. Photo courtesy of Laura Cowan

BOTTOM: Sderot teenagers learn to write and perform their own music at Sderock, a bombshelter- turned music studio that will also feature in Bialis' film. Photo courtesy of Simona Fuma

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