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05/07/2008

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The Power Of 'Students And Housewives'

'Refusenik,' a new documentary on the Soviet Jewry movement, is engrossing; other new big-issue Jewish films miss the mark.



Scenes from "The Memory Thief," top left, "Unsettled," top right and "Refusenik," above.

by George Robinson
Special To The Jewish Week

May 9 is traditionally celebrated in Russia as Victory Day, the day on which the Allies finally defeated the Third Reich. This year, the day falls on a Friday and is, appropriately enough, the opening date for three Jewish-themed films, two documentaries and a fiction film, that ponder the three great historical watersheds of 20th-century Jewish history: the Holocaust, the political and military upheavals surrounding the State of Israel and the all-but-forgotten struggle for Soviet Jewry. Of the three films, it is the last one that is by far the most fully realized. Perhaps only those who were an active part of the struggle for the freedom of Soviet Jews can remember what conditions were like for anyone in the USSR who actively espoused their



Jewish identity in the days before glasnost. Americans have a well-known penchant for historical amnesia and, although Jewish-Americans tend to have somewhat more reliable memories, particularly where our own are concerned, there is an unmistakable tendency to forget past victories in order to dwell on tragic defeats.

"Refusenik," directed by Laura Bialis, is a lengthy but thoroughly engrossing recounting of the way in which grass-roots activists, almost none of them political professionals, on both sides of the Iron Curtain mobilized public opinion around the world on behalf of Jews in the Soviet Union. The film opens with extraordinary footage taken secretly in Moscow in 1976 of a group gathered around a piano, singing "Oyfn Pripitschok," an act that could have landed all of them in

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Soviet jails. The near-complete suppression of the expression of Jewish identity — whether Zionist, Yiddishist or religious — in the Soviet Union was not merely proverbial but a literal truth.

Tracing the oppression of Jews in Russia back to the czarist period, but with a particularly useful overture focusing on Stalin's anti-Semitism, "Refusenik" methodically retells in detail the story of such Jewish activists as Natan and Avital Sharansky, Vitali Rubin, Vladimir Slepak, and their supporters in the U.S. and elsewhere. Where Bialis is particularly good is in reminding us of the way that ordinary people — "students and housewives," as a KGB agent sneered to Sharansky — built a movement that shook the halls of Congress and defied both the Soviet leaders and their police state apparatus, as well as President Richard Nixon, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and other political advocates for expediency.

"Refusenik" is a thoroughly conventional piece of filmmaking, but Bialis tells a great story quite well. At a time when much of the Jewish community is involved in trying to avert further genocide in Darfur and the new rulers of Russia are largely ex-KGB apparatchiks, this is a film that should serve as both an organizing tool and a cautionary tale.

By contrast, "Unsettled," a new film by Adam Hootnick, recounts a much more recent piece of Jewish history: the removal of Jewish settlers from Gaza by the Israeli Defense Forces during the summer of 2005. This is Hootnick's first feature film; previously he covered politics and international affairs for MTV's news and documentary division, and that background shows itself in not unappealing ways in "Unsettled." Most tellingly, he chose to focus on six participants in the action who were all in their 20s: Neta, a religious documentary filmmaker who is herself a settler in Netzarim; Ye'ela, a peace activist whose sister was killed in a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv; Lior and Meir, lifeguards at the beach at Gush Katif; and Tamar and Yuval, two young soldiers who are among those detailed to remove the settlers.

Hootnick works very hard to make sure his film is balanced. One suspects the inclusion of Ye'ela is more a bow in the direction of political parity than a real necessity, and it isn't much of a surprise that somewhere in the middle of the film, she disappears from the screen while the actual evacuation is taking place. In a sense, this underlines one of the film's basic problems. For the most part, even in a nation that prides itself on the vitality of its young, 20-year-olds tend to be more passive observers or pawns in national policy-making rather than active players, and by focusing on the ground-level action, Hootnick unintentionally obscures the larger forces at play in Gaza. (And by focusing solely on Israelis he leaves an even bigger hole in his narrative, but that would have been a very different film.)

"Unsettled" is an intelligent attempt to communicate something of the complexities and emotional rifts of the Gaza evacuation, but Hootnick is also hamstrung by the fact that this operation, which the film notes was supposed to take four weeks but only required six days, has turned out to be not much more than a sideshow in the ongoing conflict. The story isn't over, even though the film is, so Hootnick is stuck trying to

draw conclusions in the middle.

Gil Kofman, the writer-director of "The Memory Thief," decided to tackle an even more fraught subject: how we remember the Shoah in fact and fiction. His choice of vehicle, a melodrama about a non-Jew who is obsessed with the death camps, is a potentially dangerous one. Lukas (Mark Webber) is a tollbooth attendant working on Los Angeles highway; his life seems to consist of little more than visiting his mother, a catatonic patient in a hospital, bantering with a co-worker who is saving for a sex-change operation, and buying lottery tickets. Then a skinhead aimlessly tosses a copy of "Mein Kampf" into Lukas' booth...

In a roundabout way that is never entirely believable, this mischance leads Lukas into a growing fascination with the Holocaust. He attends the funeral of a locally prominent survivor where he meets and is attracted to Mira (Rachel Miner), herself the daughter of a truculent former concentration camp prisoner (Jerry Adler). When he begins working for a Holocaust archival foundation and obsessing on a famous pop filmmaker who has made an acclaimed fiction film about the camps, things begin to go south quickly.

In the press notes for "The Memory Thief" someone invokes "Taxi Driver," and in an interesting way, Kofman's film is sort of an inversion of this Scorsese film. Where Travis Bickle is a restless urban ethnic (despite his name, how could it be otherwise when he's played by Robert DeNiro?), constantly in motion in his cab, the WASPy Lukas is trapped inside his cubicle. Travis worships a gentile goddess, Lukas a Jewish one. Both of them are seen briefly as avid consumers of pornography and prisoners of mass media images.

The problem is that the issues raised by Martin Scorsese in 1976, while far from clear-cut, at least seem to have some possible resolution and the film's ambivalence, while troubling, is fairly well-defined. By contrast, Kofman's attitude towards the representation of the Shoah, the accumulation of Holocaust testimony, the vicarious use of others' suffering by psychological pain junkies like Lukas is all over the map and, as the film runs down in its last half-hour, the result is rife with self-contradictions and the kind of inappropriate metaphor-mongering that Kofman decries elsewhere. He is clearly an intelligent and inventive dramatist, but this is a story that definitely got away from him. n

"Refusenik" opens on Friday, May 9 at the Quad Cinemas (34 W. 13th St.) "Unsettled" opens May 9 at the Pioneer Theater (155 East 3rd St.) "The Memory Thief" opens May 9 at the Quad Cinemas (34 W. 13th St.)

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