

Rabin and Begin portrayed as ‘Soldiers and Peacemakers’ in new film

Second of two films based on memoir by former ambassador Yehuda Avner opens in the US on the eve of the 20th anniversary of Rabin’s assassination

BY RENEE GHERT-ZAND | October 9, 2015, 1:22 pm |

In 1995, prime minister Yitzhak Rabin asked Yehuda Avner to put on hold his diplomatic work as Israel’s ambassador to Australia and return to Israel to assist him at the Knesset. The two had worked together before, when Avner advised Rabin during his first term as prime minister between 1974 and 1977.

On Friday, November 3, 1995, the two men signed off on the contract outlining Avner’s new position. The very next evening, Rabin was assassinated by Yigal Amir.

However, the following Monday, Rabin was buried at Mt. Herzl, and a bereaved Avner, honoring his commitment, reported for work — with foreign minister Shimon Peres, the acting prime minister.

Now, on the eve of the 20th anniversary of Rabin’s murder, a documentary film about Avner’s recollections as part of five prime ministers’ teams is showing in the US, starting October 9 in New York.

The film, “[The Prime Ministers: Soldiers and Peacemakers](#),” is the second in a series of two films based on a 2010 bestselling memoir by Avner. The first, “[The Prime Ministers: The Pioneers](#),” released in 2013, dealt with Avner’s years serving prime ministers Levi Eshkol and Golda Meir. This second installment focuses on the premierships of the Labor Party’s Yitzhak Rabin and Likud leader Menachem Begin, two men who went from polar opposites of the political spectrum to eventually share certain common goals and outlooks with respect to Israel’s future.

As with the first film, in the second we get the same fly-on-the-wall perspective of an aide who drafted speeches and correspondence for the Israeli leaders, and who also sat in on many key, sensitive meetings. And, as in the first film, here we also learn a great deal about Israel’s foreign

policy, and far less about domestic politics. This, of course, makes sense given the role of Avner, a native of Manchester, England, in supporting the prime ministers in their English communications and with relations with the Jewish Diaspora.

Viewers will likely be more familiar with the historical events depicted in this new film, including the 1976 Entebbe hostage rescue, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977, the 1978 Camp David Accords, the 1979 Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty, the 1993 Oslo Accords, and the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty signed in 1994.

However, viewing "Soldiers and Peacemakers" is bittersweet knowing that Avner [died this past March at 86](#). The film's director, Richard Trank, told The Times of Israel that Avner managed to see the film shortly before he died, when it was screened in late 2014 at the Jerusalem Jewish Film Festival.

"I think it meant a great deal to him," said Trank, who is executive producer at the Simon Wiesenthal Center's [Moriah Films](#), while in Israel recently for screenings.

Avner's work on the two films was not limited to on-screen interviews that were taped periodically over the course of approximately two years. He also readily and energetically traveled around with Trank to various screenings of the first film, graciously answering questions from the audience.

"We had such a good time doing that," Trank said. "He answered every single question. He was very patient and didn't ever make people feel foolish for asking anything."

Trank believes Avner appreciated the attention the films brought him toward the end of his life.

"He was a very humble man who was used to being in the background. Having the spotlight on him was odd for him at first, but he grew to like it," the director said.

'Patriotism governed their body and soul over the whole of a lifetime'

While "Soldiers and Peacemakers" is primarily about Rabin and Begin and significant moments in Israeli history, it also portrays Avner himself. It is about his great dedication to serving the state and his unshakeable Zionism.

"He was a realist, but he still had a sense of hope and optimism about the country, especially when it came to its young people. He still believed in what this country is about, and that there is more good than bad here," reflected Trank.

In this new film, Avner describes Rabin and Begin as having wanted only to do what was best for Israel.

"Patriotism governed their body and soul over the whole of a lifetime," he states with great

passion.

The same could be said of ambassador Avner, a dedicated public servant himself.