

‘The Prime Ministers’: A film journey continues

BY ERIC A. GOLDMAN | October 8, 2015, 5:55 pm |

Given that Jews make up a major segment of the producers and writers in the film industry in this country, it might seem odd that for a long time there wasn't a major English-language Jewish film-producing unit here.

Christian groups make documentary films. They even make narrative films with powerful religious themes. The Mormons have LDS Films, out of Salt Lake City, producing as many as eight feature narrative films a year. So why had it taken Jews so long to establish a film producing organization?

I guess it was not a priority, particularly at a time in the 20th century when most Hollywood Jews did not want to call attention to themselves. Instead, they just wanted to blend in and be seen as good Americans. Fortunately, that changed in 1980, when the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles created a subdivision, Moriah Films, with the mandate to create documentaries “concerning human rights and the major events and personalities of 3,500 years of Jewish history.” Its latest production, “The Prime Ministers: Soldiers and Peacemakers,” is its 14th production, and one worthy of our attention.

Kudos to the center. We hope that others to join them!

The Wiesenthal Center turned to major personalities in Hollywood and asked them to help in any way they could. That assistance came in the form of both financial aid and professional services. Finally, the center was able to make its first film, “Genocide,” with narration by Orson Welles and Elizabeth Taylor and music by Elmer Bernstein. The film, which began as a multimedia project, finally was completed in December 1981. Three months later, Wiesenthal Center director Marvin Hier and documentarian Arnold Schwartzman were on stage to receive the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. Since then, Moriah Films has made a variety of productions, some stronger than others, along the way picking up another Oscar for its 1997 film, “The Long Way Home.”

The Wiesenthal Center decided to adapt Yehuda Avner's 2010 memoir, “The Prime Ministers,” about Avner's time working in the Israel Foreign Service and the Prime Minister's office, for film. The British-born Avner had been secretary and speechwriter to prime ministers Levi Eshkol and Golda Meir and adviser to prime ministers Yitzhak Rabin, Menachem Begin, and Shimon Peres.

He also had been Israel's ambassador to Great Britain and Australia. Avner was right there at many of the key moments in Israeli history and he was privy to many of the backroom dealings that take place in political life. He recounted much of it in his memoir, and now it is in the films produced from the book. "The Prime Ministers: The Pioneers," about Golda Meir and Levi Eshkol, played in theaters in 2013, and "The Prime Minister: Soldiers and Peacemakers" will open today at AMC Empire Theater in New York.

"The Prime Minister: Soldiers and Peacemakers" begins where the previous film ended, in 1974, the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, with Golda stepping down as prime minister and Yitzhak Rabin becoming Israel's first Israeli-born leader. Avner is the narrator of this epic story. Many of us know some of it, but it is greatly enhanced by his wonderful storytelling talents and wit. Avner takes us behind the scenes and places some of the human elements that affected the work of these two great leaders, their strengths and their weaknesses, into context.

He talks about Rabin's uncanny ability to size up difficult situations and Begin's Jewish heart, which affected every decision he made. Avner reflects insightfully on the relationship between Rabin and Begin and the incredible respect that each man had for the other. Director Richard Trank highlights it by beginning the film with the story of the Altalena, a ship that the Irgun brought into the new Jewish State in 1948. The Irgun's leader was Menachem Begin. At the time, David Ben-Gurion had demanded that with creation of the new state, there be only one Israeli armed force — the Haganah — not the diverse armies that existed before. So when the Irgun, still operating as its own military entity in Jerusalem, brought in guns and ammunition by ship, there was a lengthy negotiation about who would receive the material. This ended with misunderstanding and mistrust, and Haganah troops fired on the Altalena.

Yitzhak Rabin was one of the command group on the beach and Menachem Begin was on the ship as it was shelled. Sixteen members of the Irgun and three members of the Haganah died that day. Despite that history, the two men, always on opposite poles of Zionist ideology, grew to respect each other. Begin even took Rabin's advice and kept Yehuda Avner on as an aide when he took over as prime minister.

Richard Trank does an excellent job putting Avner's incredible story onto film. Michael Douglas voices Yitzhak Rabin and Christoph Waltz does the same for Menachem Begin. In the film, we gain a real sense of Yitzhak Rabin's character and integrity, which forced him to resign in 1977 and brought him back to the prime minister's office in 1992. We get a genuine feel for Menachem Begin's Jewish flavoring, which gave him a tidal wave of Sephardic support in 1977, sweeping him into power. We also see his unique relationship with Egyptian president Anwar Sadat. In between there are treaties, a war in Lebanon, Sabra and Shatila, Camp David, Entebbe, newly elected U.S. presidents, an intifada, and historic negotiations. Trank uses precious film footage and photographs and crafts an amazing documentary. The near total absence of Prime Minister Shimon Peres is puzzling, however.

Ambassador Yehuda Avner was a passionate and devoted Israeli public servant. Before he died

in March at the age of 86, he told The Times of Israel, “Only after I finished my book did I realize that I was living the first 50 years of Israeli history.” Now we get to experience those amazing years through the medium of cinema. We are so thankful for his insights, and to Moriah Films for putting them onto film.

Eric Goldman writes and lectures on Jewish cinema and will be teaching a film mini-series beginning next month at the JCC on the Palisades. He is adjunct professor of cinema at Yeshiva University.