

Los Angeles Times

MOVIE REVIEW

'Being Jewish in France'

THE FILM TRACES THE MINORITY GROUP WHEN IT WAS IN THE NATION'S GOOD GRACES, AND A FALLING OUT.

By KENNETH TURAN, Film Critic

August 7, 2009

Good things don't come exclusively in small packages, sometimes they come in great big ones that don't stay around for very long. Which is the case with the exceptional new three-hour documentary that is playing for three days only at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The film, "Being Jewish in France," screening today, Saturday and Sunday at LACMA's Bing Auditorium, may sound like a picture with a limited potential audience, but that turns out to be not the case.

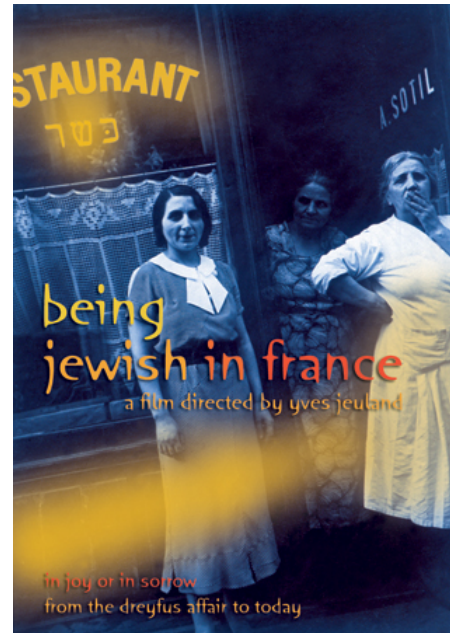
For one thing, as directed by Yves Jeuland, the story this film tells has fascinating parallels not only with Jews in the U.S. but with any minority group making its way in a majority culture. Also, the very specificity of this project, the enormous amount of work that went into telling a very particular story, bring an air of authority to "Being Jewish" that is appealing across the board.

It also doesn't hurt that the saga of the Jews in France is an especially fraught one, a complex tale of interdependence and contention. How did it happen that a nation that prided itself on being the first on the continent to offer Jews full citizenship, a nation that gave rise to the Yiddish saying "as happy as God in France," is now routinely described as "the most anti-Semitic country in Europe."

The reason Jewish fortunes have waxed and waned in France turns out to be a push-pull dynamic between the nation's best instincts and its worst. Although this is a country that has always taken quite seriously its position as the home of liberty, fraternity and equality, it's also a place where a dark, potent and resilient strain of anti-Semitism has perennially found a home.

"Being Jewish" begins with a newsreel clip of an event that perfectly captures that duality: the 1906 reinstatement into the service of French Army officer Alfred Dreyfus. A dozen years earlier, in a particularly vicious example of anti-Semitism, Dreyfus had been falsely convicted of treason. Only the intervention of non-Jews like Emile Zola, who believed that France should stand for justice, brought the truth to light.

Though the Dreyfus affair is well known, "Being Jewish," which was made for French television, is filled with incidents that will be less familiar to U.S. audiences, like the story of a French rabbi who became a national hero during World War I when he was killed by shrapnel while bringing a



crucifix to a Christian soldier. Although their patriotism in the Great War helped French Jews, the postwar influx of refugees from Eastern Europe made these established folks nervous that the uncouthness of the newcomers would engender increased hostility.

In fact, the Great Depression did bring an anti-Semitic revival, but nothing prepared French Jews for what happened under the collaborationist World War II Vichy government, when Jews were first forced to wear yellow stars and then deported in tens of thousands to death camps.

After the war, things did not improve, as many French citizens refused to believe what had happened to the deportees. Worse than that, the French government for decades refused to recognize that Jews had been specially targeted during the war or acknowledge that French officials had done the actual deporting.

The next big change in the equation came in 1962, when thousands of Jews living in Algeria, part of the "pied noir" community, left their homeland after the revolution and changed the face of the French Jewish community one more time.

As the home of the largest Arab and the largest Jewish population in Europe, it was perhaps inevitable that France would become a flash point for conflict between these two groups, especially after the Intifada shook Gaza. Demonstrating how events in the Middle East morphed into an upswing in French anti-Semitism is one of the film's most potent segments.

"Being Jewish in France" makes exceptionally good use of vintage photographs and film clips in telling its story, and in fact won an award for best utilization of archival footage. It also boasts an especially varied and articulate group of talking heads, including comic actor Jean Benguigui and politician Robert Badinter, to comment on events past and present. It is Badinter, a former Minister of Justice, who sums things up best: "The Jews and France," he says, "are a love affair gone sour."