

'Yippee' — Paul Mazursky Witnesses Chasids Gone Wild

by Tom Tugend, Contributing Editor

In all his 76 years, filmmaker Paul Mazursky had never seen anything like the 25,000 Chasidim singing, swaying, blowing shofars and dancing around a lake.

"It's like the old days at the Apollo in Harlem, with the crowd going wild," the irreverent Mazursky said. "Can you dig it?"

The scene is from his documentary, "Yippee: A Journey to Jewish Joy," which had its Southland premier this week at the Palm Springs International Film Festival. The film is quite a change of pace for the creator of such quirky social comedies and dramas as "Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice," "Harry and Tonto," "Next Stop, Greenwich Village," "An Unmarried Woman," "Down and Out in Beverly Hills" and "Enemies: A Love Story."

Despite his artistic reputation and string of Oscar nominations, Mazursky has found it increasingly difficult to find backing for his iconoclastic movies, which are infused with his wry take on the human condition.

During the past decade, after a quadruple heart bypass operation, Mazursky has gone back to his roots as an actor and comedian, including parts in HBO's "Curb Your Enthusiasm" and "The Sopranos," while looking for the right combination of film and financing.

But last year, he and his two camera crews found themselves in Uman, a Ukrainian town of 80,000, whose population sweats every Rosh Hashanah during an invasion of ecstatic Chasidim dressed in white kites (robes), black suits or streimels (fur hats).

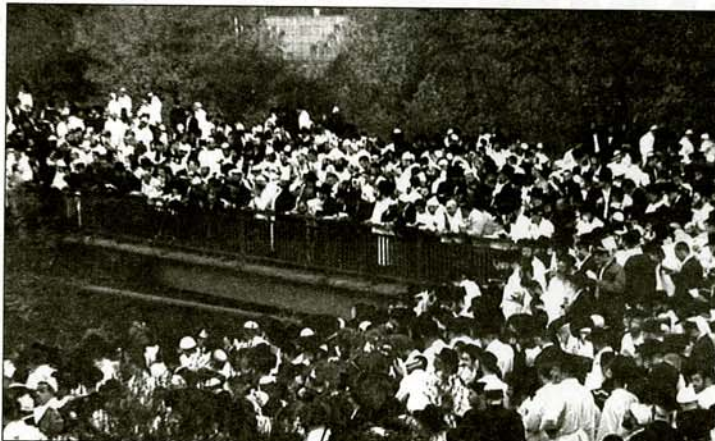
They come to pray at the grave of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, the great Chasidic master, disputatious tzadik (learned scholar) and great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Chasidic movement. Nachman was buried in Uman in 1811 at the age of 38.

What had brought the insistently secular Mazursky to Uman were the urgings of three disparate Angelinos: David Miretsky, his optometrist; Shmuel Levy, a devout Moroccan-born rock musician; and Rabbi Ezer Tauber.

All three regularly participated in the pilgrimage to Uman, and they promised Mazursky that he would witness an event unlike any he had ever experienced.

Putting up \$50,000 of his own money, and with his broken arm in a sling, Mazursky embarked on the adventure with his friends and a six-man crew, including his son-in-law.

During a brief layover in Munich, he warmed up by filming the beer-swilling Ok-



More than 25,000 — mostly Chasidic — Jews from around the world were expected to visit the Ukrainian town of Uman for three days of praying, singing and dancing. Photo courtesy National Center for Jewish Film.

toberfest, before stopping in Kiev, where his grandfather is buried, and then reaching Uman after a three-hour drive.

In the run-up to the climax of the three-day celebration, Mazursky meets and talks with Chasidim, policemen, scholars and peasants, combining the roles of an innocent abroad, travel guide and self-described "wise guy from Brooklyn."

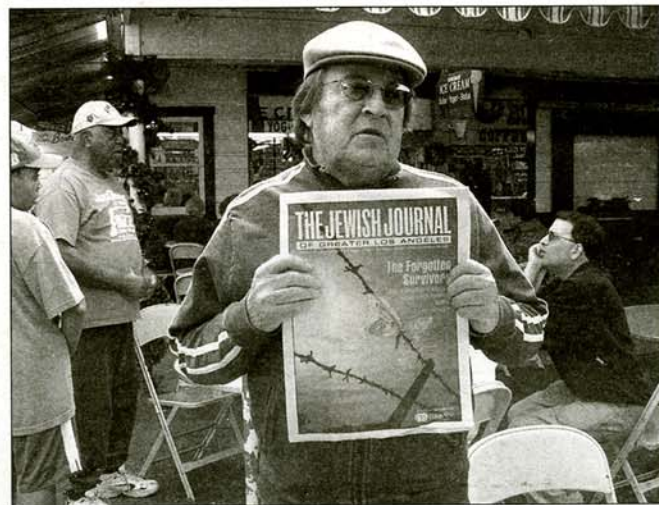
Typical is his encounter with two local

peasant women selling fruit from a sidewalk cart. They, like all the other Uman natives, know about Rosh Hashanah, which enriches the town by \$2 million each year.

Despite the windfall, one woman is not entirely happy.

"Jews are not cultured people," she complains. The other woman disagrees.

"They are cultured," she insists, "they are just different."



Paul Mazursky pitching his favorite paper

Mazursky's camera lingers on other happenings. There is a rustic folk festival with pretty dancing girls in costumes and later, Vodka Appreciation Day, during which the filmmaker digs into his bottomless reservoir of jokes, many unprintable.

His favorite joke, told at least three times in the film, goes something like this: Cohen meets Schwartz in New York's old garment district and Cohen says, "I heard about the fire." Schwartz puts his fingers to his lips and whispers, "Shhhh, tomorrow." (The joke dates back to at least the Great Depression, when some storeowners facing bankruptcy would set fire to their shops to collect insurance money.)

The film climaxes on the evening of Rosh Hashanah, when the 25,000 Chasidim throw their sins into the lake and pray, dance and sing through the candle-lit night.

"Madonna and Woody Allen should be here," Mazursky murmurs.

Before leaving, Mazursky organizes a bull session with Tauber and Dr. Julian Unger, a British neurologist, to explore the meaning of what he has seen.

"We come to Uman because on the day of judgment, Rabbi Nachman will be our lawyer, pleading our case before God," Tauber explains.

Unger has a darker observation. "You know 27,000 Jews were drowned in the lake. thousands of Jews were drowned in the lake."

"When the Nazis came, they again murdered Uman's Jews," Unger continued. "It is a great irony that in 2005, we should be dancing in the streets of Uman. We are dancing on the graves of our martyrs."

Mazursky, the wise guy from Brooklyn, drew his own lessons. "I could never think like a Chasid," he ruminates during a two-hour interview in his crowded Beverly Hills office.

"I think of life as a cosmic joke, which keeps getting bigger all the time. But I've learned tolerance and maybe affection for the Chasidim. They are real people, who can see light in the darkest things," he said.

The title of the film comes from another Mazursky observation. "It is better to wake up in the morning and instead of kvetching, say 'Yippee.'"

"Yippee" is available on DVD through the National Center for Jewish Film at Brandeis University and will be included in a retrospective of Mazursky's works at New York's Lincoln Center, May 4-10. For more information visit jewishjournal.com. ●

A Treasury of Jewish Films

Sharon Pucker Rivo recently dropped by my home to talk about the National Center for Jewish Film (NCJF) and left behind a catalog of the center's holdings.

It's rare that a catalog makes for spell-binding reading, but I discovered in it a new and fascinating picture of pulsating Jewish history, as viewed by filmmakers over more than 100 years.

The oldest film listed is the silent "Levy and Cohen: The Irish Comedians," which was made in 1903 and runs for all of one

minute. By the time the great American director D.W. Griffith ("Birth of a Nation") made "Romance of a Jewess" in 1908, the 16 mm film ran an astonishing 10 minutes.

Rivo dropped off a DVD of one of the latest catalog listings, Paul Mazursky's "Yippee: A Journey to Jewish Joy."

I hate to admit it, but after decades of writing about Jewish-themed movies, I had only the vaguest notion of the National Center for Jewish Film (NCJF), but executive director Rivo filled me in.

Located on the campus of Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass., as an independent entity, NCJF holds the world's largest, most comprehensive collection of Jewish-themed films and videos.

Included are some 10,000 cans of film, holding features, documentaries, shorts, newsreels, home movies and institutional films from 1903 to the present, augmented by thousands of master videotapes.

Many of the older holdings have been restored by the center, which also serves as a research resource, organizer of film festivals and distributor to institutions and individuals.

Almost every Diaspora community in the

world is represented, with particularly rich holdings from Poland, the Soviet Union and the United States. Holocaust films record the Final Solution at work in obscure places, and there is even a selection of Nazi propaganda films.

Rivo takes special pride in her Yiddish-language collection of 35 features, including restored productions of Poland's "Yidl Mitn Fidl" (Yiddle With His Fiddle), the Soviet Union's 1919 "Tovarish Abraham" (Comrade Abraham) and America's "Der Yiddisher Kenig Lir" (The Yiddish King Lear), in which the Shakespearean tragedy time-travels to the Jewish Vilna of the early 1900s. — Tom Tugend, Contributing Editor