

# The Heart of Jewish Film is Brookline

By Lisa Rivo

## The National Center for Jewish Film (NCJF) – a unique, independent, nonprofit film archive, distributor,

and resource center – houses the largest, most comprehensive and diverse collection of Jewish-themed film and video in the world. The Center's ever-expanding collection of feature films, documentaries, institutional, and home movies, dating from 1903 to the present, from across the globe, is the visual record of the Jewish people.

### It All Began in Brookline

In the mid 1970s, Brookline residents Sharon Pucker Rivo and Miriam Saul Krant set out to rescue a languishing collection of 30 Yiddish-language feature films produced in the 1930s and 1940s in Russia, Poland, Austria, and America. Thirty years later, the Center they created is an internationally-recognized leader in both the fields of film preservation and Jewish culture.

In 1975, when Rivo and Krant committed themselves to saving these rare, decaying films, they found little interest beyond a fledgling film preservation community. They did find support, however, in the

National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) which, although it could not buy the collection itself, immediately pledged a grant of \$41,000 to begin preserving the collection. Since that time, NCJF has received uninterrupted support from the NEA.

The Center's first restorations – including the classics *Tevye* (1939) starring Maurice Schwartz and *Green Fields* (1937) directed by Edgar Ulmer – hit theaters (including the Coolidge Corner Theatre) in the late 1970s, 40 years after their initial releases. By 1991, the prescience of Rivo and Krant's vision was validated when *Tevye* became the first non-English language film to be included in The Library of Congress' National Film Registry. A founding member of the Association of Moving Image Archivists, NCJF was invited by the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Film Preservation Foundation to participate as one of ten institutions in the

millennium film preservation program, "Treasures of American Film Archives."

### A Leader in Yiddish Film Revival

Over the past 30 years, NCJF has preserved and restored (at a cost of \$50,000-\$80,000 per film) 35 Yiddish-language feature films, and is recognized as the world leader in the revival of Yiddish cinema. Now available in 35mm, 16mm, video, and DVD formats, these restored films have been exhibited to sold-out crowds in hundreds of venues worldwide, from Helsinki to Rio de Janeiro, introducing modern audiences to this unique cultural and cinematic heritage.

After completion of the first restorations, the Center's mission expanded to collecting, restoring, and distributing other "orphan" films relevant to the Jewish experience.

Rivo and Krant visited with researchers, archivists, filmmakers, and Jewish organizations from around the world, asking them to look in their basements and attics for film materials long abandoned. Today, the Center's collection includes over 10,000 cans of film addressing a wide range of topics, including the Jewish immigrant experience in America, pre-World War II European Jewry, the Holocaust, Judaism and the arts, relations between Jews and other groups, Sephardic culture, Israeli history, and Hollywood portrayals of Jewish life. NCJF's resources include ethnographic materials from past and present Jewish communities in China, Mexico, Morocco, Australia, Tunisia, Russia, Argentina, Bosnia, India, Romania, Greece, and Egypt. Individually and collectively, the Center's film materials work to dispel stereotypes about Jews and educate audiences about the



Miriam Saul Krant, co-founder of the National Center for Jewish Film. Photo courtesy of the National Center for Jewish Film.



TOP: A scene from "Yiddle with His Fiddle," produced in Poland in 1936. Photo courtesy of the National Center for Jewish Film.  
BOTTOM: A scene from "The Dybbuk," produced in Poland in 1937. Photo courtesy of the National Center for Jewish Film.

OUR TOWN  
BROOKLINE



NCJF Executive Director Sharon Pucker Rivo in Jerusalem during the Jerusalem International Film Festival, which has premiered NCJF's new film restoration every year since 1989. Photo courtesy of the National Center for Jewish Film.

Jewish Film | Continued from page 31

diversity and cultural richness of Jewish life.

### Preserving Films for Future Generations

Along with its Yiddish film restorations, the Center has executed scores of other preservation projects, restoring and distributing American silent film comedies and feature films; rare, early Russian films; pre-World War II home movies of Yurburg, Horodok, Novogradok, and Berlin; travelogues of Bialystok, Cracow, Warsaw, Vilna, and Lwow in the late 1930s; industrial and fundraising films produced by Jewish agencies; and early documentary footage of Palestine/Israel. NCJF's most recent restorations include the Yiddish feature

films *The Cantor's Son* (1937) and *The Living Orphan* (1937); home movies documenting the way of life in several small communities in pre-war Eastern Europe and of Jewish chicken farmers in 1950s New Jersey; and a film of President Harry Truman addressing the issue of Middle East politics at an Israel bonds dinner February 16, 1957.

Once these film materials have been preserved and restored, NCJF makes them available to scholars, curators, journalists, teachers, authors, artists, filmmakers, and the general public. The Center's restored materials have been exhibited in museums worldwide (Museum of Jewish History in Paris, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, Museum of Modern Art in New York City), and have been used as the basis for numerous books and articles, including J. Hoberman's incomparable *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds* and *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture* (by Brookline resident Joyce Antler). Over the years, NCJF-rescued materials have appeared in scores of documentaries, news programs, and dramas.

### Worldwide Reach

In addition to its own restored materials, the Center distributes the feature and documentary films of over 100 contemporary filmmakers from across the globe. It produces public programs and film festivals, and provides programming consultation to more than 2,000 individuals and institutions a year.

As part of its distribution network, NCJF produces and sells video-cassettes and DVDs of its titles for both home and educational use. Last year, over 1,000 individuals and institutions purchased at least one cassette, further expanding the Center's audience, and enabling rural, elderly, and infirm viewers access to these rare materials. The Center's films are used by venues big and small and are featured prominently in numerous humanities, history, film, and Holocaust courses.

### JEWISHFILM.2007

Having helped launch the current spate of Jewish film festivals over 25 years ago, NCJF began organizing its own film festival following the 1998 opening of the Edie and Lew Wasserman Cinematheque at Brandeis University. This month, NCJF will host its 10<sup>th</sup> annual film festival.

JEWISHFILM.2007  
Wasserman Cinematheque  
Brandeis University  
April 12 - 22

April 12 *First Basket* (New England premiere) – the first ever film about Jews and basketball

April 14 *My Mexican Shiva* (Sneak Preview) – a wry comedy from Mexico

April 15 *The Living Orphan* (East Coast premiere) – newly restored 1937 Yiddish feature  
*Samuel Bak: Painter of Questions* (New England premiere)  
*Dear Mr. Waldman* (East Coast premiere) – a coming of age story set in 1961 Tel Aviv

April 18 *Secret Courage* (Boston premiere) – the unknown story of Holocaust rescuer Walter Suskind

April 21 *Three Mothers* (New England premiere) – Israeli feature about the bond – and secrets – between beautiful triplets

April 22 *Fence, Wall, Border* (USA premiere) – documentary film about the building of the separation fence in Israel

*2 or Three Things I Know about Him* (New England premiere) – autobiographical documentary by the son of a prominent Nazi  
May 13 Encore Screening of *Yippee* (East Coast premiere) – Hollywood director Paul Mazursky's documentary about traveling to Uman for Rosh Hashanah

Encore Screening at the Institute of Contemporary Art

April 19 *2 or 3 Things I Know about Him* – autobiographical documentary by the son of a prominent Nazi

Call 781-736-8600 or visit [www.jewishfilm.org](http://www.jewishfilm.org) for details.

While the Center acts globally, it thinks locally. Despite its international cast of filmmakers and collaborators, The National Center for Jewish Film is, in many ways, a local endeavor. Since its founding, NCJF has been located on the campus of Brandeis University and its scholars have contributed to the robust educational thrust of the center's work. Sharon Pucker Rivo, Executive Director of NCJF, (who began her career as a film producer at WGBH Boston) is an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department at Brandeis University, teaching courses on Jews and film.

The Center's first restorations were spearheaded by filmmaker (and former Brookline resident) Henry Felt. Brookliner Sylvia Fuks Fried, Executive Director of the Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry, is NCJF's long-time Education Director and its first Yiddish translator. NCJF's local filmmakers include Ron Blau (*Our Time in the Garden*), John Michalczyk (*Of Stars and Shamrocks: Boston's Jews and Irish*), Pamela Berger (*The Imported Bridegroom*), Dan Akiba (*My Brother's Wedding*), Moshe Waldoks (*Angst*), Leib Cohen (*Advice and Dissent*), and Jamil Simon (*Baklava and the Meaning of Life*).

One year ago, NCJF Associate Director Miriam "Mimi" Krant passed away. Her loss is felt each day, but her voice and vision remain intact.

For more information about The National Center for Jewish Film, visit [www.jewishfilm.org](http://www.jewishfilm.org).

*Lisa E. Rivo is Associate Director of The National Center for Jewish Film. She holds degrees in art history and American visual culture, and prior to joining NCJF, she was associate editor and senior writer of African American National Biography, published by The W.E.B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard University and Oxford University Press. She grew up in Brookline and now lives in Jamaica Plain.*