

News Tribune - Tuesday, July 25, 2006

Historic Yiddish-language film restored

Brookline resident introduces 'The Cantor's Son' at Jerusalem Film Festival

By Christopher Rocchio
DAILY NEWS STAFF

WALTHAM – While many of the world's newest and best films were shown at this year's Jerusalem Film Festival in Israel, one of the event's main attractions was originally released in 1937.

"The Cantor's Son," an American-made, Yiddish-language feature, was recently restored by the National Center for Jewish Film (NCJF) at Brandeis University and premiered at the 23rd annual festival.

"It's nice to be able to take an artifact that is rich in culture and introduce it to a new generation of moviegoers," said Sharon Pucker Rivo, co-founder and executive director of the NCJF. "It's also a very important festival because it represents the heart and soul of the Jewish people."

Rivo recently traveled to Jerusalem to introduce the film at its festival premiere. She said "The Cantor's Son" is the latest of 35 film restorations completed by the NCJF, and she added it looked absolutely beautiful on the big screen at the Jerusalem Cinematheque.

"It's a wonderful musical starring Moishe Oysher, a famous singer, actor and cantor in the 1930s," said Rivo. "The film is kind of like a Yiddish version of 'The Jazz Singer.'"

The NCJF has been attending and presenting films at the Jerusalem Film Festival for the past 17 years. Rivo said many of the latest Israeli feature films, documentaries and shorts premiere at the festival, so it also provides the NCJF an opportunity to view the best Jewish films around. In all, Rivo saw more than 40 films over the course of 10 days at five different venues in the Jerusalem area.

"The showing of 'The Cantor's Son' was sold out, and the audience loved it," said Rivo.

While in Jerusalem, Rivo said



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Sharon Pucker Rivo, right, founder and executive director of The National Center for Jewish Film, poses with Lia van Leer, the founder and director of the Jerusalem Film Center, at the Jerusalem Film Festival recently.

she had dinner at the home of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. The following day, war erupted on the borders of Lebanon and Israel, but Rivo said it did not really hinder the festival, except emotionally.

"It was like sitting in Brookline while a war is happening in Plymouth," said Rivo. "It was distressing."

Rivo, a Brookline resident for the past 35 years, worked at WGBH in the 1960s as a television producer of documentary films. While working at Brandeis in the early 1970s on a project centered on resources for Jewish education, Rivo said she literally tripped over a large collection of privately owned Yiddish films.

"The heyday of Yiddish films was in and around New York in the 1930s, and it was a direct offshoot of Yiddish theater," said Rivo. "They represent a major collection of ethnic films made in the U.S. that weren't done in Hollywood."

At the height of their popularity, she said Yiddish films played in

numerous cities across the country, including Roxbury. However, following World War II, she said much of the market for Yiddish films vanished, which is what made her find even more important.

Rivo co-founded the NCJF in 1976, and it became an independent nonprofit organization in 1979. It exclusively owns an estimated collection of 12,000 reels of film and video, and Rivo said it is committed to an ongoing mission to collect, restore, preserve, catalogue and exhibit films with artistic and educational value relevant to the Jewish experience.

From libraries and museums to filmmakers and historians, she said the NCJF also tries to disseminate their collection to the widest possible audience.

"The center had archival beginnings, but it has grown into the largest and most diverse collection of Jewish films in the world outside of Israel," said Lisa Rivo, Sharon Rivo's daughter and associate director at the NCJF.

Other than converting their library from video to DVD and continuously increasing their collection, Rivo said the NCJF has become one of the main providers of programming for Shalom TV, a subscription-based Jewish cable network that is expected to launch at the end of August. She said the center has also started to collect home movies made by Jews, whether they are from a chicken farmer in upstate New York or a businessman in Everett.

Rivo said she is excited by what's in store for the NCJF, but at the Jerusalem Film Festival, she had an opportunity to reflect on the center's past. Miriam Saul Krant, co-founder of the NCJF, died in March, and part of the restoration of the "The Cantor's Son" was paid for through a fund in her name.

"(Krant) used to go to the festival with me every year," said Rivo. "It was a nice honoring of her memory."

Christopher Rocchio can be reached at 781-398-8009 or crocchio@cnc.com.