

A Reel Fine Way to Preserve Jewish History

The National Center for Jewish Film at Brandeis University Collects and Restores Old Films



The National Center for Jewish Film was co-founded by the late Miriam Saul Krant, pictured above. It exists to preserve Jewish films such as "Rene and I," a documentary about twins who survived Auschwitz and the experiments of the notorious Dr. Mengele, (right).

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Jewish Journal Intern

Documentation of history, including Jewish history, is disappearing every day. Old films and movies from decades ago are rotting in attics and basements, but The National Center for Jewish Film is working to locate and restore this old footage.

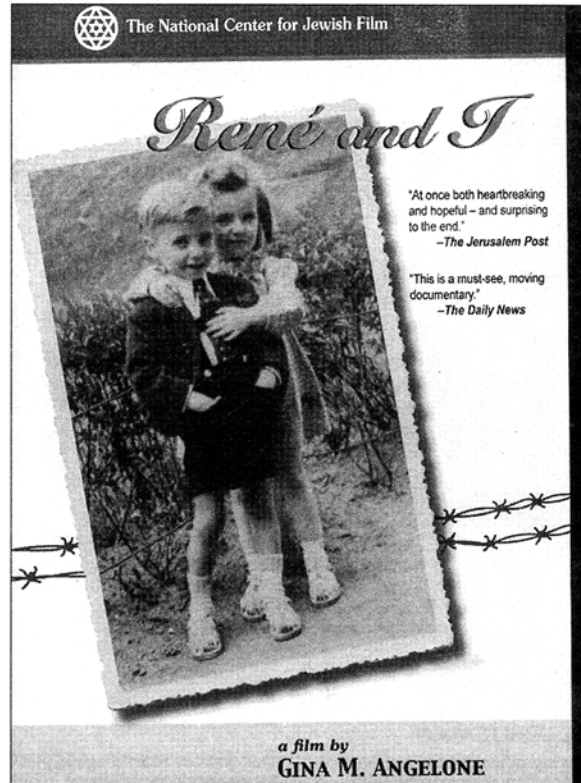
The primary goal of the organization is collecting and documenting old films. Their archives contain over 10,000 cans of film. Eventually, they hope to catalog all the footage they have in stock.

The National Center for Jewish Film houses the largest collection of Jewish films outside of Israel, and over the years

they have uncovered a few hidden gems. One of the treasures in the archive is a home movie showing a few minuets of everyday foot traffic captured in the Warsaw ghetto.

"It is kind of fun. It is like a treasure hunt every day," said Sharon Pucker Rivo, executive director of the Center.

The National Center for Jewish Film is an independent non-profit located on the campus of Brandeis University. Although the university gives it a home, it is not fiscally tied to the school. The organization gets its funding via federal and state sources, the Massachusetts Culture Council, private donors, the Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP), and from money earned through



Photos courtesy of National Center for Jewish Film

sales of films and stock footage.

When preserving and restoring old films, the organization starts with those that are on nitrate reels, because nitrate decomposes and is highly flammable. When selecting which films to work on, the organization also considers the rarity of the footage.

At this point, the NCJF has restored 36 full-length Yiddish feature films, as well as dozens of other reels of films and home movies. It currently houses 350 titles in its circulation library, about 100 of which are available on DVD. The films span the gamut from old silent Yiddish comedies, and snippets of Jewish life in Poland and Germany, to works like "Rene and I," a documentary about twins who survived Auschwitz and the atrocities of the notorious Dr.

Mengele.

We are always hunting for "film material that documents the strength and diversity of Jewish life," Pucker Rivo said.

More than 100 independent filmmakers have purchased the rights to use the Center's stock film footage in documentaries and other projects. They also distribute their films to theaters, museums, synagogues and schools, which can rent titles for community events and fundraisers.

The actual film restorations are done in professional laboratories. The DVDs are made on the Brandeis Campus.

Every spring, the National Center for Jewish Film also hosts a festival on the Brandeis campus where it showcases its work, and highlights contemporary films of Jewish interest.