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Film



Left: Jewish people wearing Star of David badges from the Lodz Ghetto in Poland during World War II. Below: Abba Kovner and his group of resistance fighters from the Vilna Ghetto.

BOSTON JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL
In person Nov. 1-12 and
online Nov. 13-15
www.bostonjewishfilm.org

Apsell explains the seed for "Resistance" came about in 2016 while she and frequent collaborator Kirk Wolfinger were filming a "Nova" episode. Wolfinger had urged her to get on a plane to Lithuania. Cameras followed as the late Jewish studies scholar and archeologist Richard Freund confirmed that an escape tunnel leading from the Ponari forest killing site did, in fact, exist.

The discovery stayed with Apsell. Years later, after retiring from a 44-year tenure at "Nova" (difficult, she says, because she "loved every day"), she kept wondering, "Why haven't I heard any of these stories?" Making a film in response took some coaxing from Wolfinger, who became the "Resistance" co-director; Freund, featured in the documentary; and her husband. But, Apsell said, "I kind of started to feel I had to do it."

The film encompasses sections on both unarmed resistance and armed revolt. Those familiar with Holocaust history may recall the Warsaw Ghetto uprising or the heroics of poet Abba Kovner, who wrote a manifesto calling on youth to fight the Nazis. "Resistance" also gives voice to accounts from Jewish women like Bela Hazan, who at age 19 posed as a Catholic courier for survival. "I tried my best to hold my head up," a voiceover for her says in the film, "so that no one could know what was going on in my heart."

Such testimony, especially from young women, propelled Apsell to finish the project. "I really, really wanted to tell their stories," she said.

Forty-seven production days, 59 interviews in 59 locations, meticulous archival research, lots of fundraising, and a pandemic later, the reality of releasing a film outside an institution like PBS began to sink in. "Boy, was this an eye opener," said Apsell of the tough odds of getting a film festival acceptance. While waiting to hear from the Boston Jewish Film Festival, she said, "My heart was in my throat for months."

Meanwhile, Gossels says "Resistance" was the first film she accepted. "One of the themes of this year's festival is moral courage. Paula's film falls squarely within that," said Gossels, adding, "I would never screen a film that didn't transcend its subject matter. Because they have ideas that then translate into our own lives."

Gossels hopes "Resistance" pushes Boston audience members to consider, "What does resistance mean?"

In hindsight, learning about Jewish acts of resistance helped Apsell hone her own sense of purpose, post-retirement, as someone with strong convictions about both science and faith. "You can't control events," she said, "but you can control how you respond."

'Resistance' documents stories of Jewish people who fought back during the Holocaust

By Erin Trahan
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Nearly 80 years have passed since the Holocaust's final days. Yet despite vast documentation and scholarship over that time, veteran science journalist Paula S. Apsell says the story remains incomplete. "It does not emphasize enough Jewish resistance," she said during a recent interview via Zoom.

Instead, the lifelong Bostonian and former executive producer of GBH's "Nova" series says a troubling concept persists — that, during the Holocaust, Jews accepted their fate like "sheep to the slaughter." She abandoned retirement to independently produce and co-direct a new documentary that proves otherwise.

"Resistance: They Fought Back" makes its world premiere at the 35th annual Boston Jewish Film Festival. The festival runs in Boston area theaters Nov. 1-12 and online Nov. 13-15. When the first "Resistance" screening (on Nov. 2 at 7 p.m. at West Newton Cinema) sold out, the festival added a second for Nov. 9 at 6:30 p.m. at the Brattle Theatre.

Boston Jewish Film artistic director Lisa Gossels says the board discussed postponing the festival amid the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. Earlier this month, the Boston Palestine Film Festival canceled in-person events. As of press time, Boston Jewish Film had chosen to continue the festival as planned, with extra security.



GHETTO FIGHTERS HOUSE MUSEUM

"What's happening is so personal to so many people that we hope being in a theater will be a positive thing," Gossels said by Zoom. The festival expects 36 special guests in-person and via Zoom — directors, actors, and film subjects — and will host a program following every

film. Gossels hopes moviegoers will unexpectedly "meet a neighbor at screening, have a conversation, or a hug."

As in past festivals, this year's offerings speak to the diversity of the Jewish experience, with movies ranging from the coming-of-age story "I Like Movies"

to a documentary about bridging Black American and Jewish identities, "Rabbi on the Block." Gossels points to a shorts program with several ties to the Boston area as a source of "moral courage." For instance, in "Dear Ani," Massachusetts native Keith Wasserman initiates a gutsy correspondence with musician Ani DiFranco. "In each of these films, everybody's heeding their inner sense of integrity and purpose," Gossels said. She sees that form of courage in "Resistance," too.

In addition to recounting the Holocaust chronologically, "Resistance" illustrates the breadth of tactics Jewish people used to rescue themselves and each other amid genocide. Their acts of defiance included playing violin in ghettos, smuggling gun powder to resistors, and creating escape routes from camps. Nearly every effort could count, this documentary asserts. Because schools, libraries, theaters, and more were illegal in the Warsaw Ghetto, actor Maggie Siff says in a voiceover for ghetto resistance member Vladka Meed, "It was an illegal life."