

GALLERY גלריה

'I ended up showing how wonderful we are'

Nili Tal doesn't think her documentary 'Saving Nur,' about Israeli doctors and volunteers who aid a sick Gazan girl, is too forgiving of Israel

Itay Stern

"Forgiving? Give me a break. There are two terror attacks within my film, I was even caught up in one of them myself and kept filming," says Nili Tal when I suggest that her film "Saving Nur," which follows a Gazan girl in need of a liver and kidney transplant, takes an overly forgiving attitude toward the Israeli side.

"I went to Duma to meet the Dawabsheh family," she continues. "Have you been to Duma? Have you ever seen a burned child? I saw him in Sheba [Medical Center, Tel Hashomer]. I made a true film, as I see life and see the people. Don't forget that Nur and her parents received tremendous medical treatment here. Dr. Elhanan Nahum, director of the pediatric ICU at Schneider [Children's Medical Center] didn't go to sleep at home with his wife and children when Nur's life was in danger. The surgeon, Dr. Michael Gurevich, rushed to the hospital in the middle of the night to operate on her for the sixth time. He had barely changed out of his pajamas. My film sketches a situation. Situations that I don't control. Life controls them."

Tal has been making documentaries for more than 40 years. She started out back in the 1960s as a journalist for Haaretz, but by the 1970s began bringing film crews to record many of the lesser-known sides of life in Israel. In recent years she made "Ukraine Brides," a documentary series about Slavic women who come to Israel to find Israeli husbands, and "Etched in My Body," which profiled several wives of polygamist cult leader Goel Ratzon.

Now for the first time, Tal has directed a very political movie with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at its center. "Saving Nur," which was shown last night on Channel 1, follows

a little girl from Gaza who is seriously ill and needs a life-saving kidney and liver transplant. Her young parents, who have little money, manage to raise a million and a half shekels through an online campaign that attracts donations from Palestinians, Israelis and people from other countries. The sum is raised in just four months, something of small miracle.

Adding to the miraculous atmosphere are Jewish volunteers from Israel, bereaved parents who are members of the Parents Circle - Families Forum, who drive children from Gaza to hospitals in Israel. In one of the film's peak moments, Nur's mother Maha Hajj says that if her daughter should die following the liver transplant surgery, she would want her organs to be donated to Israelis first. This statement seems almost subversive considering that it comes from a Palestinian mother who needs to obtain countless permits in order to leave Gaza to get medical help for her child.

I don't know what public opinion is in Gaza, but I assume that everyone wants the same things as we want here: Love, family, health and money.

"I wanted to make a totally left-wing, political movie," says Tal. "Yuval Roth, whose brother Udi Roth was murdered in the territories by three Hamas militants, was supposed to be the hero of the film. Shortly after his brother's murder, he founded an organization that transports sick Palestinian children from the checkpoints and borders to hospitals in Israel. And his wife, Yael, is



Nili Tal

Element photography

a steadfast member of the Women in Black who stand at the Gan Shmuel junction, holding signs that say 'Evacuate the Settlements' and 'Free the Territories.' I said to myself: 'This is it, the time has come. Here are perfect characters for a film against the occupation.' But darn it, wouldn't you know it - instead of a leftist film I ended up with a 'right-wing' film that shows how wonderful and kind we are, helping sick Palestinians and driving them back and forth too."

Did you get to speak to other Gazans? Did you get to hear what they think about Israel these days?

"In the film I show my encounter with Salah Abdel Rahman Na'im - a tall and handsome gentleman from Gaza who had come to Israel with his grandson who was going to have open-heart surgery at Sheba. On the way there he tells me that his father, who was a tank mechanic, was killed in the Six-Day War. And that he himself was just seven years old at the time and had to leave school and go to work from then on. Right away I asked him if he hates Israelis and he replied with marvelous candor: 'Hate Israelis? I have no room for hatred because if I put hate in my heart, there's no room for love. I have never hated. Hatred doesn't hurt the one you hate. It hurts you first

of all.' I am certain that Salah was speaking to me honestly."

To what extent do you think his view reflects public opinion in Gaza?

"I don't know what the public opinion is in Gaza. I met a few people and they don't hate Israel. I don't do



A scene from the film "Saving Nur."

Nili Tal

public opinion surveys and have no ties to politicians. I assume that everyone there wants the same things as here: love, family, health, money.

"If they have those four things, then people are happy. Don't forget that Gaza is independent, it's not under

Israeli occupation and there are no Israeli soldiers there. They had democratic elections there and Hamas was elected. So yes, we're not letting them build an airport or seaport. So what? They've found alternative ways to get around."

You show the efforts

made by Israelis on behalf of sick children from Gaza, but meanwhile the Israeli security bureaucracy is making things difficult for Nur's continued treatment.

"That's true. The Shin Bet [security service] is not letting Nur's parents come with her for her periodic

checkups in Israel. Every day I send faxes and emails to the Shin Bet asking them to let her come in with her father for her checkups. To issue him a six-month permit like a cattle dealer would get. But I'm talking to the wall. I hope this article will help."

The life and mysterious disappearance of famed Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg

Rafael Medoff

"Raoul Wallenberg: The Biography," by Ingrid Carlberg, MacLehose Press, 640 pp., \$29.99

Two great mysteries surround the life of famed Holocaust figure Raoul Wallenberg: Why was he willing to risk his life to save Jews from the Nazis? And what exactly happened to him after the Soviets took him into custody in 1945?

In this richly detailed biography, Ingrid Carlberg, a prominent Swedish journalist, describes a number of instances in which the young Wallenberg, who was born in 1912 in Sweden, interacted with Jews prior to the onset of the Holocaust. There was the Hungarian Jewish classmate in grade school whom he protected from anti-Semitic bullies. There were the months he spent vacationing in Haifa in 1936-37, where he "heard horror stories about the situation in Germany" from Jews who had fled from the Nazis. There was Wallenberg's intercession, in Berlin, on behalf of a German Jewish business associate who was arrested during the 1938 Kristallnacht pogrom. There was even the belated discovery by Wallenberg, who studied architecture in the United States but ended up working on behalf of his family's business, that one of his grandmothers had a Jewish grandfather.

Still, to what extent any of these experiences influenced Wallenberg's later actions is unclear.

One might imagine that the dramatic smuggling of more than 7,000 Danish Jews to Sweden in 1943 inspired Wallenberg. The Swedish government, which until that point had shown relatively little interest in the plight of the Jews, extended itself far beyond what other neutral European nations had been willing to do. Yet Carlberg gives no indication that the Danish episode had any impact on Wallenberg, and given the extraordinary amount of detail in this book, one must assume that if Wallenberg had written or said anything about the Danish rescue, she would have reported it.

By the spring of 1944, only one major European Jewish community still eluded Hitler: the approximately 800,000 Jews of Hungary. Even before then, following an autumn 1943 visit to Budapest, Wallenberg described to his Jewish colleagues "several worrying anti-Semitic incidents" that he witnessed. Wallenberg visited Budapest periodically in connection with his family's food import-export firm, the Mid-European Trading Company,

and over the years, Carlberg notes, he "acquired an impressive skill in bureaucratic gambling, that he would have so much use of later, in his rescue work."

On March 19, 1944, the Germans occupied Hungary. Hundreds of thousands of Jews residing outside the major cities were forced into makeshift ghettos where starvation and disease were rampant. Soon, under the direct supervision of Adolf Eichmann, deportations to Auschwitz began - in full view of the world. "Jews in Hungary Fear Annihilation," read the headline of a report in The New York Times, five days before the deportations began, warning that the Germans were "about to start the extermination" of Hungary's Jews, who would be killed by "gas chamber baths" and other methods.

Three days after the deportations began, a Times article headlined "Savage Blows Hit Jews in Hungary" began: "The first act in a program of mass extermination of Jews in Hungary is over, and 80,000 Jews of the Carpathian provinces have already disappeared. They have been sent to murder camps in Poland."

Similar reports appeared in the Swedish press, and there is no doubt Wallenberg followed the news, but it took a series of remarkable political developments in Washington to set the stage for his rescue mission.

Grocery salesman turns diplomat

Challenging the Roosevelt administration's abandonment of European Jewry, Jewish activists known as the Bergson Group in late 1943 sponsored newspaper ads, organized a protest march to the White House and mobilized congressmen to introduce a resolution urging U.S. intervention. (Surprisingly, Carlberg omits this crucial part of the story.) Meanwhile, aides to Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr. discovered that the State Department had been suppressing news of the mass killing and sabotaging opportunities for rescue. Morgenthau pleaded with the president to act before "the boiling pot on [Capitol Hill]" exploded and Congress embarrassed him on the issue. FDR responded by establishing the War Refugee Board.

Seeking an emissary to go to Nazi-occupied Budapest, the War Refugee Board's representative in Sweden, Iver Olsen, contacted Swedish Jews with Hungarian business connections. That is how he was introduced to Wallenberg, whom Olsen enlisted to go to Hungary; in



Raoul Wallenberg

AP

deed, the board financed his mission there.

Under Olsen's pressure, the Swedish foreign ministry agreed to grant diplomatic status to Wallenberg, even though he was really "a grocery salesman completely inexperienced in foreign affairs." Without that diplomatic appointment, Wallenberg's rescue work would have been impossible.

By the time Wallenberg reached Budapest, in early July, Hungarian leader Miklos Horthy had halted his government's involvement in the deportations. (Hungarian officials mistakenly believed Allied bombing raids on Hungarian railroad yards were undertaken in response to appeals by European Jewish rescue activists to bomb the railways leading to Auschwitz.) More than 400,000 Hungarian Jews already had been deported to their deaths, but some 200,000 residing in Budapest were still safe - temporarily.

In August, however, the Germans overthrew the Horthy government and replaced it with a regime headed by the fascist, anti-Semitic Arrow Cross movement. Anti-Jewish violence erupted throughout Budapest and rumors were rife that the deportations would soon resume. Wallenberg designed a "protective passport," which gave the holder a Swedish semi-citizenship that in most cases enabled Wallenberg to shield them from deportation; he distributed thousands of them to Jews in Budapest. There even were instances in which Wallenberg climbed to the roof of a train car that was about to take Jews to Auschwitz and handed out the passports to the captives inside, resulting in them being taken off the train.

An estimated 10,000 Hungarian Jews found shelter in the 31 buildings that Wallenberg rented in Budapest. Funds for these operations came almost entirely from

lenberg was murdered by the Arrow Cross and never arrested by Soviet forces at all. Later, Soviet officials claimed he died of a heart attack (even though he was just 35 and in good health) while in a Soviet prison. The evasive and contradictory statements by the Soviets made it obvious they were hiding something. Yet successive postwar Swedish governments declined to press for answers regarding Wallenberg, for fear of annoying the Kremlin. Opportunities to free him, or at least to find out what happened to him, repeatedly were missed.

Despite Ingrid Carlberg's impressive efforts, the full story of what happened to Raoul Wallenberg in Soviet custody may never be known, although clues continue to surface. Just this summer, the newly discovered diary of a senior Kremlin official was found to matter-of-factly refer to Wallenberg being "liquidated" on the orders of Premier Josef Stalin and Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov.

The most important question for future generations is the one that cannot be answered: Why would a Swedish businessman with no particular connection to Jewish matters risk his life to save Jews in a country a thousand miles away? Perhaps all one can say, in the end, is that in every generation, there are a handful of people who somehow rise to the occasion. We can only be grateful that in this case, the hero's personal courage was matched by a persistence and resourcefulness that resulted in saving many tens of thousands of innocent lives.



1930 Country, City, Boy, Girl Childhood in Haifa

Free entrance during August for kids and teens under 18 to the exhibits.

This exhibition is the product of dozens of objects taken out of storage, photographs from personal albums, as well as oral accounts told with much excitement by natives of the city and others who had spent their childhood in Haifa between 1930 and 1960.

Guided tours every Saturday at 11:00

City Museum, 11 Ben Gurion Ave., Haifa, Tel. 04-9115888

www.hms.org.il



Weather

Slightly cooler

Today will be partly cloudy and slightly cooler. Tomorrow will be the same. Friday will be clear and hotter, with heavy humidity along the coast. Saturday will be partly cloudy and a little cooler.

Thursday Friday Saturday
Sunrise 06:14 Sunset 19:05

Air pollution index: 30.8.16
low medium high very high
Jerusalem Tel Aviv Haifa Krayot

Be'er Sheva Karmiel Atula Mod'in
pollution forecast for this morning: low

