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Taking Soviet Holocaust films out of oblivion

Olga Gershenson takes in stride the challenge of reviving a genre people barely knew about when it was active, let alone in the post-Soviet era.

By Judy Maltz | Mar.05, 2013 | 2:03 PM | 1

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Olga Gershenson in Tel Aviv in February 2013. Photo by Moti Milrod

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The conference auditorium at Yad Vashem is not typically abuzz with laughter. But when Olga Gershenson, a Russian-born cultural studies scholar, was introduced to participants at an international Holocaust symposium held there the other day, the muffled sounds of giggling were difficult to ignore.

Gershenson had been invited to present her upcoming book on Soviet-made Holocaust films. When her credentials were read out, though, what appeared to amuse the audience was actually her previous book – the one on gender and public toilets.

“It was a bit of an uncomfortable moment considering the solemn nature of the event,” acknowledges the 43-year-old professor of Judaic and Near

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Eastern studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, But she took it in stride, having grown accustomed over the years to having eyebrows raised at the mention of her academic pursuits.

“The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe,” due to be published later this year by Rutgers University Press, provides a meeting point for Gershenson’s great passions: Russian culture, Jewish history and film. But unlike many academics, she wasn’t willing to suffice with a book contract with a respectable publishing house. “For me, this project is about taking these films out of oblivion,” she says. “It’s not about having another book with my name on it to put on the shelf.”

True to her mission, Gershenson has helped raise money to subtitle some of the lost Soviet films she’s discovered, and she’s convinced quite a few film curators to add them to their rosters at their upcoming festivals.

When she first began broaching the subject of Soviet-made Holocaust films, recalls Gershenson, the typical response she’d get from friends and colleagues was disbelief. “What do you mean ‘Soviet-made Holocaust films?’” they’d ask me. “The Soviets actually made films about the Holocaust?”

Yes, and how, as her book reveals. Many were banned and subsequently released, though heavily censored, often with Jewish references deleted. Many were never known about until Gershenson happened to stumble upon their screenplays in dusty, mildew-reeking Soviet archives. (“I had to wear an inhaler while I was in there because of my allergies.”) Some had never been checked out in 50 years but eventually put her on the paths of their writers, some still alive today in Israel.

“When do you think the first Soviet films about the Holocaust were made?” she loves teasing her audiences and then stunning them with the correct response. “No, no, no, much earlier, much earlier,” she tells those who inevitably shout out post-Second World War dates. “The Soviets were way ahead of Hollywood here. The first three Soviet films on the Holocaust, films that directly attacked Nazi anti-Semitism, were made in 1938.”

Even more remarkable is that one of these 1938 films, “Professor Mamlock,” ultimately saved many Jewish lives during the Holocaust. How so? “We have evidence,” says Gershenson, “that Jews who saw this film and were living near the Soviet border understood after the Hitler-Stalin pact was signed that it was better for them to cast their lot with the Soviets, and they moved deeper into Soviet territory.”

Make no mistake about it: Gershenson is not a typical academic. Not one to lock herself in the ivory tower banging out journal articles that few ever read, she far prefers engaging the masses in culture to presenting papers on the subject at dry academic conferences full of PhDs.

These days, in fact, she’s become somewhat of a fixture on the greater New York Jewish cultural circuit. When she’s not presenting films at Jewish and Israeli film festivals, she’s introducing and discussing Russian theatrical works for fans of the genre. And when she’s not on the podium, serving as panelist, presenter or moderator at cultural events, she’s making herself felt behind the scenes selecting works, recommending speakers and judging submissions.

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In the past few months alone, she participated in a post-performance panel discussion on Israel's Nalaga'at deaf-blind acting ensemble at the NYU Skirball Center for Performing Arts; she was part of a jury judging submissions for the Foundation for Jewish Culture's documentary film fund; she served as an academic consultant for the second annual Russian-Israeli Film Festival; she wrote reviews of films shown at the Jerusalem International Film Festival for The Forward; and she presented Russian films at both the Museum of Jewish Heritage and the JCC of Manhattan.

The months ahead will be no less jam-packed, as Gershenson has just accepted invitations to present her upcoming book, along with clips of old Soviet-made films, at the 92nd Street Y in New York and the Memorial de la Shoah in Paris (not to mention her most recent presentation at Yad Vashem).

Born in the Ural Mountains, Gershenson says that despite her interest in Soviet culture and her personal roots, "I never felt very Russian." At age 20, then, when the ban on Soviet immigration was lifted, she was among the first Russian Jews to make their way in Israel, coming even before her family and setting up base in Jerusalem, where she studied for a master's degree in communications at the Hebrew University. After completing her doctorate at Amherst, she began publishing research on the representation of Russian immigrants in Israeli film as well as a book called "Gesher: Russian Theater in Israel" in 2005.

Her next book, "Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender," published in 2009, is not that dramatic a departure as one might think from her previous focuses, she insists. "I have always been interested in cultural underdogs, and the fact that the lines are always longer outside women's public bathroom is proof that women are discriminated against. After all, it's men who design the bathroom, and they don't take into account women's needs."

Her latest passion, yet further proof of her tendency to identify with the underdog, is Palestinian culture.

In recent years, Gershenson has combined her travels to the former Soviet Union with stop-offs in the West Bank, Egypt and Jordan. "I teach Israeli culture, but you can't understand Israeli culture if you don't understand Palestinian culture," she explains. As part of branching out in this direction, she's learned Arabic, and true to her desire to make culture more accessible to the masses, she's begun volunteering on behalf of the Freedom Theatre in Jenin, set up by the late Juliano Mer-Khamis, the Palestinian-Israeli actor and filmmaker, who was assassinated two years ago.

No longer satisfied with presenting and analyzing other people's creative work, though, Gershenson's next project is producing her own film. More specifically, she wants to make a film about Soviet-Holocaust movies. She's encouraged, she says, by her recent experiences sharing her knowledge of the subject with diverse audiences. "Once I can convince people that such a genre did in fact exist," she says, "they actually find the subject quite compelling."

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