

'Our Disappeared': reclaiming lost lives

Jewish Advocate - Boston

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Date: Sep 25, 2009
Start Page: 16
Pages: 1
Section: ARTS
Text Word Count: 561

Document Text

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Movie Maven

It's a shame that the documentary "Our Disappeared" by Juan Mandelbaum is airing on public television on the night of Yom Kippur. If you can, set your VCR or DVR.

Mandelbaum, a Brookline filmmaker and veteran of PBS documentaries, came to the United States some 30 years ago when it became obvious that he was risking death remaining in his native Argentina. In the wake of a 1976 coup that brought a military junta to power, activists and others opposing the regime began to disappear. They were taken from their homes or off the streets, most of them never to return.

He came to make this film after searching for an old girlfriend on the Internet, an all too common practice of our modern age. Yet what he found was not at all typical. The woman, Patricia Dixon, was among the desaparecidos, the disappeared. Upon further searching he found that several of his other friends were taken as well. The film does not dwell on the stories of beatings and torture, but we hear enough to be horrified. This was a brutal criminal regime, and though it was driven from power, Argentina still suffers the effects of its reign.

While this is not a "Jewish film," Jews were among the victims of the brutal regime. Ironically, Mandelbaum's parents were among those who had fled Nazi Germany and found a refuge in South America. Ruth Weisz, his next door neighbor from his childhood, still lives in the same house. One of her sons - along with his wife - were among those arrested and tortured. Oddly the couple was allowed several supervised visits with their family, who were caring for their infant son, Juan. Weisz recalled during one visit a guard admired the stereo system and requested to hear Some Wagner. Somehow she found the courage to reply they didn't listen to Wagner in their house, perhaps they could put on Mozart instead.

As Mandelbaum interviews the friends and families of those who were murdered, he gets to reconnect to his own past. However, it would be a mistake to think the film is about the filmmaker, even though it's obviously a personal story. At the end of their interview Weisz tells Mandelbaum the worst curse among the Jewish people is to be completely forgotten. By telling the stories of those the regime sought to erase, the film ensures that they will remain in living memory.

Juan Weisz, only an infant when his parents' "disappeared," is now an adult. He has opened an activist bookstore in Argentina with the money he was given by the government by way of reparations. We see him with his own young son, Marcelo, named for the grandfather he will never know, but whom he will always remember.

[Sidebar]

Relatives carry banners with photos of the disappeared on the anniversary of the coup in Argentina.

[Sidebar]

Director Juan Mandelbaum made the documentary after attempting to trace former girlfriend Patricia Dixon, who is among the disappeared.

[Sidebar]

"Our Disappeared" is part of the "independent lens" series on WGBH's Channel 44, Sept. 27, at 9 pm, For details and other air times, visit www.pbs.org/independentlens.