

Jewish history, saved one frame at a time

The National Center for Jewish Film archive is in a race to restore the Jewish century before it bites the dust

By [Matt Lebovic](#) June 29, 2013, 11:39 pm



BOSTON – When Barbra Streisand needed visual inspiration to create shtetl sets for “Yentl,” there was only one place she could call.

Since 1976, the National Center for Jewish Film (NCJF) has bridged the divide between a lost Yiddish world and contemporary Jewish

filmmaking. In addition to restoring and distributing forgotten classics of Yiddish cinema, the center represents Jewish filmmakers in the US, Israel and elsewhere.

Operating from a cozy basement space at Brandeis University, NCJF is the only film archive focused on the Jewish Diaspora. Treasures include more than 15,000 reels from around the world, ranging from 1920s-era Lithuanian “home movies” to the 1947 Exodus voyage footage.

Bringing to life a vanished Yiddish culture, NCJF has loaned films for use in dozens of museum exhibits, television programs and stage performances. Scholars frequently reference footage rescued by NCJF to explore – for instance – a history of the Jewish mother, or the “queering” of Jewish American culture.

For almost 40 years, founding executive director Sharon Pucker Rivo has helped NCJF evolve with the times, not to mention audiovisual technology.

Rivo became one of Boston WGBH television’s first women producers in 1963, but she always had an eye on using film to foster Jewish identity. When she discovered a trove of lost Yiddish films owned by the late filmmaker Joseph Seiden, Rivo started what became the country’s largest Jewish film library.



Production still from the 1940 Yiddish feature Jewish Melody directed by Joseph Seiden (seated left). Seiden's film collection was NCJF's initial archival acquisition. Jewish Melody awaits restoration. (photo credit: courtesy NCJF)

“With our archive, we are preserving something from the past which can be used for the future,” Rivo told the Times of Israel. “These are the home movies of a culture, showing the diversity of Jewish life and experience.”

With a chuckle, Rivo recalls approaching Jewish leaders during the mid-70s to ask for a quarter of a million dollars to restore ten Yiddish films.

“They asked me if I was crazy,” said Rivo, who is also a professor of Jewish film at Brandeis University.

As NCJF's collection grew, funding followed.

Recognizing the center's role in rescuing a lost genre, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was an initial and ongoing supporter. Film-to-film restoration and preservation of a 90-minute Yiddish movie can cost up to \$70,000, so NCJF sells hundreds of Jewish titles – including dozens of restored “orphan films” – to help make ends meet.

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More than 7,000 educators and assorted researchers contact NCJF each year for help with projects. Footage from Manhattan's Lower East Side taken in 1903 – for instance – helped academics reconstruct turn-of-the-century gender roles and fashion.

Researchers also ask Rivo to track down lost, esoteric footage, including the time she unearthed an Israel fundraiser speech given by President Harry Truman.

Other NCJF findings include anti-Semitic, Nazi-era propaganda pieces, and 1933's “The Wandering Jew,” the first film to protest anti-Semitism. Rivo also discovered and restored the only print of “Breaking Home Ties,” a 1922 Jewish response to anti-Semitic campaigns by Henry Ford and the Ku Klux Klan.

On any given day, films rescued or restored by NCJF are seen by thousands of museum visitors, whether at the Illinois Holocaust Museum in Skokie or London's Imperial War Museum. Jewish museums around the world have incorporated NCJF footage into permanent exhibitions, including the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia.

Visitors to Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum see NCJF footage immediately upon entering the building, in the form of artist Michal Rovner's haunting video art compilation of pre-Holocaust Jewish communities.

In Rovner's massive, triangle-shaped pallet, viewers encounter yeshiva boys waving from windows as Jewish sports teams pose and women shop in the market. An old recording of children singing "Hatikva" helps listeners sense the vibrancy of pre-war Jewish life.



The incomparable comedienne Molly Picon in the 1923 Austrian silent film classic 'East and West,' one of 100 rare and endangered films preserved and restored by NCJF. (photo credit: courtesy of NCJF)

Though NCJF focuses on the Diaspora, the center holds obscure films made by the Jewish Agency and United Israel Appeal from up to 90 years ago. Findings include tourism films to build support for a Jewish state, all of which were sent to the US for processing because pre-state Israel had no film labs.

The relative absence of film labs outside the US ensured Jewish "home movies" shot in Eastern Europe survived the Holocaust. When American Jews visited relatives in Poland and Lithuania, Kodak cameras sometimes went with them. The footage they brought back to the US provides an evocative glimpse of a world on the edge of destruction.

To be clear, not all Yiddish "home movies" or cinema were produced in Europe. The standards of Yiddish cinema were as likely to be filmed in Poland as in the New World, where chicken farms on Long Island and New Jersey resembled the shtetl enough to film on location.

Between 1910 and 1940, more than 100 Yiddish films were made in the US and Europe. Though produced generations ago, the films speak to contemporary issues of gender, societal change and inter-generational conflict. Many scripts originated in the Yiddish theater, where wandering spirits were as likely to appear on stage as jilted sweatshop girls.

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In their totality, NCJF's restored Yiddish films evoke what Isaac Bashevis Singer called "the treasure house of individuality" destroyed in the Holocaust.

The center's restored films were the topic of a popular book, called "Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds," by historian J. Hoberman. Republished in 2010, the book describes a Jewish "secularized redemption" coinciding with Yiddish cinema's heyday, when Jews on two continents created films to share abroad.

Half a century before Streisand's "Yentl," Yiddish stage sweetheart Molly Picon masqueraded as a man to play klezmer music on the road.

Called "Yiddle with His Fiddle," the 1936 film was shot in Poland and endures as a beloved Yiddish musical. "Yiddle" spawned the first Yiddish sequel, 1938's "Mamele," of which NCJF will screen a restored print at the [Jerusalem International Film Festival](#) in July.

An NCJF-rescued gem familiar to the general public is 1939's "Tevya," based on Sholem Aleichem's book and later turned into "Fiddler on the Roof."

Discovered among films Rivo retrieved from Joseph Seiden's collection, "Tevya" was restored and screened commercially in 1979. Tevya's journey from dustbin to distribution is a classic NCJF "through-line," according to Rivo's daughter, Lisa Rivo, who joined the staff seven years ago.

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Because film is a medium that disintegrates, less than one-fifth of movies made before 1930 survive. The state of decay instills a sense of urgency in what Sharon Pucker Rivo calls her "daily treasure hunt" to recover Jewish history on 16 millimeter film reels.

Through a new NEA grant, Rivo will soon curate a set of Yiddish films for New York's Film Forum, followed by a national tour. Twenty years after Rivo and the Museum of Modern Art reintroduced the genre in a landmark exhibition, the demand for Yiddish cinema is stronger than ever.

For viewers less fond of translated, black-and-white Yiddish oldies, fear not. This very minute, reels from NCJF's collection are being integrated into an abundance of new documentaries,



ranging from the Triangle Factory fire of 1911 to a history of bagels in America. Documentaries about Theodore Herzl and Woody Allen are also on the docket, ensuring NCJF's remarkable assemblage of the Jewish century on celluloid gathers no dust.